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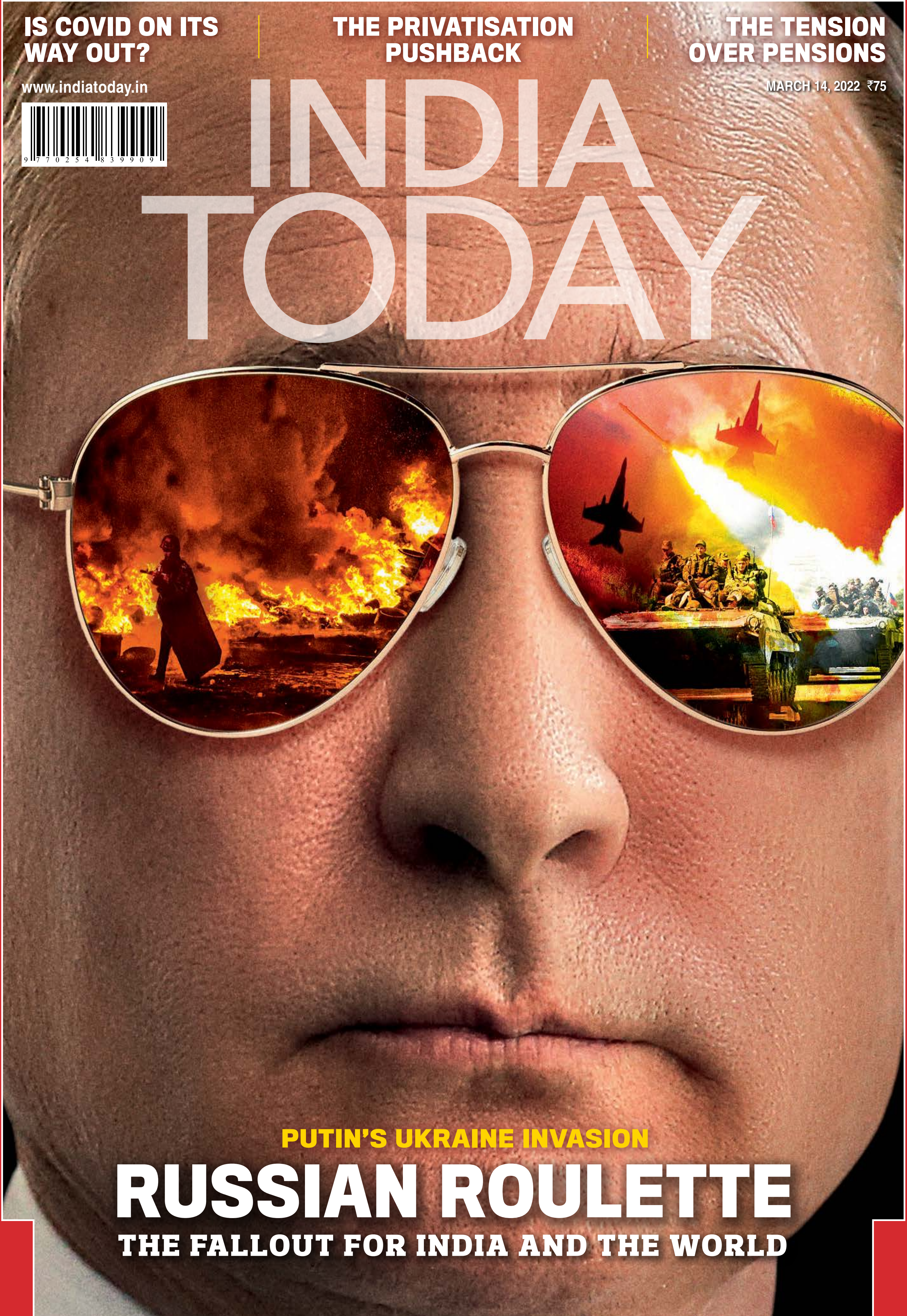

PUTIN'S UKRAINE INVASION

RUSSIAN ROULETTE

THE FALLOUT FOR INDIA AND THE WORLD

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FROM THE

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

At a time when the Cold War is history and the world is infested with nuclear weapons, a land grab of a large neighbouring country was considered inconceivable. But that is exactly what happened when the inscrutable and implacable president of Russia chose to launch a vicious attack on Ukraine, a country of 44 million people with a democratically elected government. Although Russia vastly outguns its neighbour to the west of the Don, Ukraine is proving to be no pushover. Instead of rolling over and waiting to die, as Putin perhaps expected, Ukrainians are showing incredible fortitude, resilience and pluck, a touch of the old Cossack combat-readiness. They are the new indomitable Gauls, on the opposite side of Europe. Putin, meanwhile, is filled with revanchist visions that would place him in line with the czars of imperial Russia. In spite of the chilling resemblance his invasion bore to the annexation of Austria by Nazi Germany in 1938, which was a precursor to World War II, Putin ironically claimed that the prime objective for his attack was the 'de-Nazification' of Ukraine.

The irony deepens when you consider the other man in the picture: the baby-faced Volodymyr Zelensky, a native Russian-speaking Jew who has lost ancestors to the Holocaust. A former comic actor, he once starred in a show where he played a commoner who rose to be Ukraine's president and then reprised that in real life. Imagine a scenario where his screenwriter-wife Olena Zelenska wished to create a script around a pair of starkly contrasting personalities. She couldn't have asked for anything better than to have Putin set off against her husband—the 44-year-old Zelensky is affable, disarming, always threatening to break into a smile, and wears his high office lightly. A classic populist, his ratings had been sliding alarmingly of late. But as February 2022 wound to a nervy close, the world had found a new hero in him. History placed Zelensky at the centre of the 21st century's biggest geopolitical crisis, and he didn't dodge the draft. He stood his ground against an advancing Russian phalanx, exhorted his fellow citizens to fight the good fight, and refused an American offer to save his skin. By the time he video-addressed the European Parliament on March 1, from an undisclosed location and clad in a rust-coloured tee, he had already become a figure who had his visage embossed on T-shirts.

INDIA TODAY
The NEW RUSSIA

May 19, 2008

Europe, in fact, is the heart of the dispute. Putin's original question was valid enough: should NATO, that Cold War mechanism, not only still exist but be allowed to expand, as it unremittingly has since the disintegration of the Soviet Union? It consisted of 16 members at the end of the Cold War, but today boasts a strength of 30. Unsurprisingly, the expansion was eastward—the new members all being former constituents or satellites of the Soviet Union. Putin cannot be blamed for feeling that hostile missiles now surround his country, and Ukraine's declared desire to join the alliance was a red rag to an already raging bull. While Putin was amassing his troops around Ukraine, the response of Europe was initially anaemic and disunited. America was going with its playbook of sanctions. After the invasion, the world, led by Anglo-America, turned up the heat on Russia; even Germany stirred out of its post-war pacifism, joining France in spending two per cent of its GDP on defence. Eventually, a strong united front emerged. But none of this deterred Putin. He continued his brutal assault, and even had nuclear submarines prowling the Barents Sea. To deter NATO members who may have dared to intervene, he warned of "consequences greater than you have ever faced in history". The maverick president of Belarus, Alexander Lukashenko, a Russian stooge, even spoke of a Third World War. We call it 'Russian Roulette'—a lethal game of chance in which there may be no winner.

India, too, finds itself staring at what looks like a no-win situation. It finds itself navigating a changing world order with no geopolitical or moral compass to aid it. The dilemmas are many-pronged. Russia is our oldest and stablest ally—some 80 per cent of our defence hardware is still of Russian make, and the relationship has survived even our increasing proximity to the US. How do we deal with Moscow's global ostracisation? And what do we make of the deepening Sino-Russian axis, especially if we throw Pakistan into the mix? (Imran Khan was physically in Moscow when the invasion began.) A former Indian ambassador to Russia pointedly brings it home, saying, "Imagine India's reaction if Nepal entered into a military alliance with China including having missiles directed at us. Would we sit back and watch?" Besides, American foreign policy is known to be fickle. No wonder India abstained from voting on resolutions in the U.N. condemning Russia although it put out an explanatory note that was critical of Russia. Now, if American foreign policy is consumed by the Ukraine crisis, getting more Eurocentric in focus, it would ill-serve the Indian cause. New Delhi would rather have the world's attention riveted on the containment of China than on a re-energised Europe. Strangely, one basic axiom of diplomacy has been miscalculated by both sides: Divide Your Enemy. Europe and America are more united and Russia has been pushed into the arms of China while the brave Ukrainians are more nationalistic than ever.

Group Editorial Director Raj Chengappa maps out the global and local trajectories of this world-historical event in our cover story this week. He focuses on how India must be guided solely by its long-term strategic objectives and not be shilled into choosing between fluctuating shades of grey. Executive Editor M.G. Arun and Deputy Editor Shwweta Punj evaluate the economic consequences for India. Crude prices will eventually threaten to breach $125 per barrel—and Budget 2022 calculations were predicated on a $75 price range. Throw in food and commodity price spikes, and the shadow threatens to be a long one. And India Today TV Senior Executive Editor Gaurav Sawant reports from ground zero, where we hope the story will be soon abridged. Wars are easier to start than to end. There is no telling when this war will end, especially when it depends on the whims of one man—Putin. In our interconnected world, this affects everyone in some way, just like the coronavirus. The sooner both end, the better for all of us.

(Aroon Purie)

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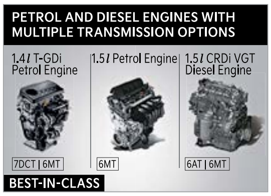
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REVS UP CONG
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WEST BENGAL:
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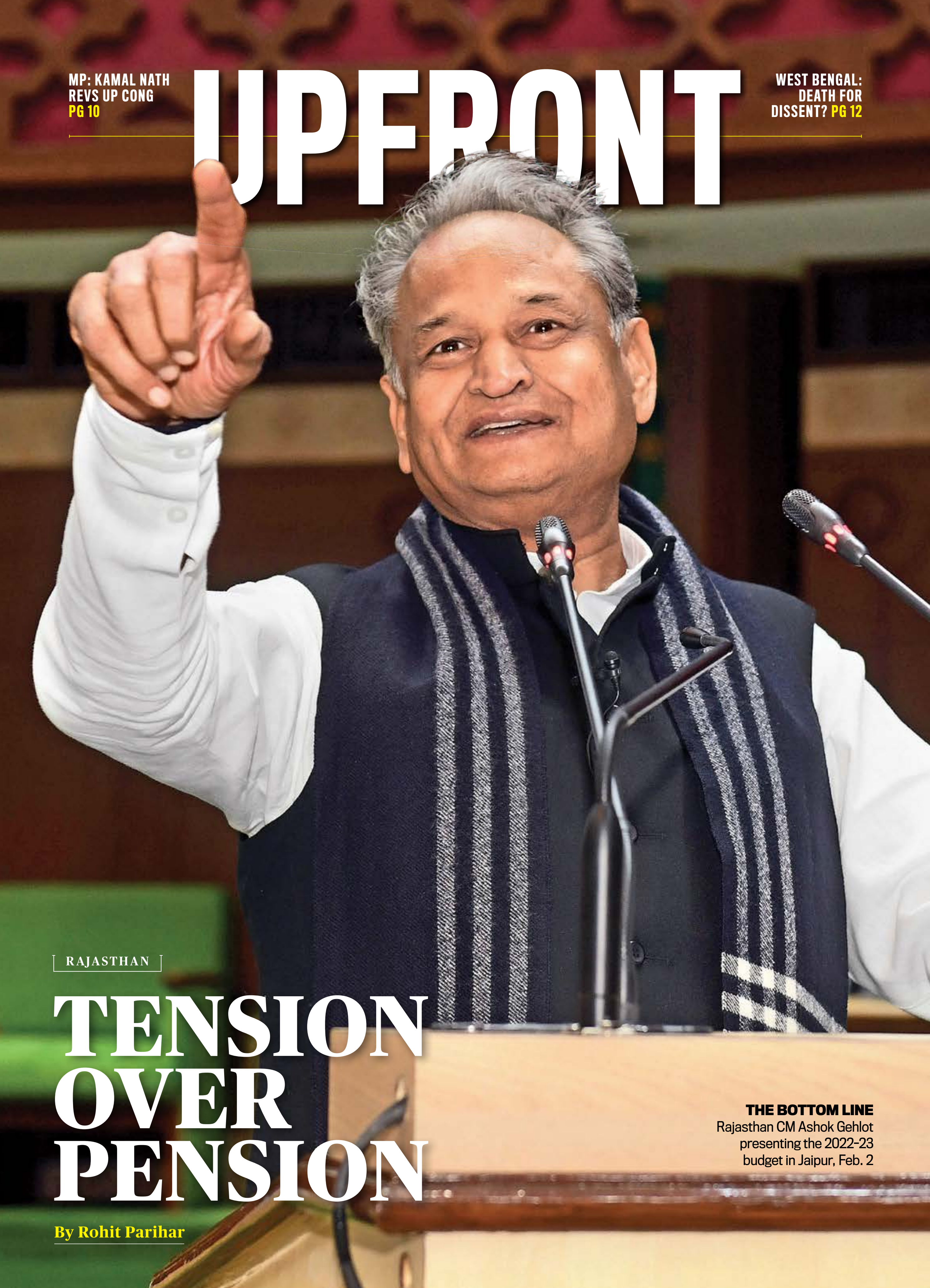

RAJASTHAN

TENSION OVER PENSION

By Rohit Parihar

THE BOTTOM LINE
Rajasthan CM Ashok Gehlot presenting the 2022-23 budget in Jaipur, Feb. 2

On February 23, when Rajasthan chief minister Ashok Gehlot tabled his fourth budget, it sent ripples across India. Social welfare was the big focus, and a major announcement was that the Congress-ruled Rajasthan government will skip the National Pension System (NPS) and revert to the old pension scheme for its staff. At a time when the demand for reverting to the old pension schemes has been growing in many states, Gehlot's declaration is clearly aimed at wooing voters in the next election due in December 2023.

In Uttar Pradesh, where elections are being held, the Samajwadi Party and the Bahujan Samaj Party have already promised that they will revive the old pension system. The chorus has begun in other states too, led by the Congress. Former Haryana chief minister Bhupinder Singh Hooda has demanded the state government do the same. The Madhya Pradesh Congress also echoed the same demand.

In Karnataka, even members of the ruling BJP want the state to revert as "the NPS has failed to deliver the perceived benefits". Much before Gehlot's announcement, back in 2018, Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal had promised to go back to the old system. In Himachal, state government employees took out a nine-day *padayatra* that culminated in Shimla on March 3 demanding a return to the old scheme.

Sensing that there is political capital to be made, Gehlot has decided to get rid of the NPS, even though it was aggressively promoted by former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, who headed the Congress-led UPA government, and his finance minister P. Chidambaram. "The National Human Rights Commission is looking into it; Kerala, Assam, Himachal Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh have set up committees to review the new scheme and the Second National Judicial Pay Commission has sought exemption from it. The army is already excluded. This shows that employees in other parts of the country are also apprehensive about future security," says Gehlot, adding that without the security net provided by the old pension scheme, the government will lose bright young people to the private sector.

The NPS was originally introduced by the BJP-led NDA government in 2004 as the National Pension Scheme. It became mandatory for all new recruits to the central government from January 1, 2004—except the armed forces—to join the NPS. From May 1, 2009, the system was rolled out for all citizens on a voluntary basis. All states except West Bengal had joined the NPS. As of January 31, the NPS has 15,362,608 members from the government and private sectors.

Financial experts advocating the NPS claim the existing guaranteed pension scheme is unsustainable.

THE NPS NETWORK

As of now, the markets-linked NPS has given better returns to subscribers

CATEGORY	NUMBER OF SUBSCRIBERS	TOTAL FUND CONTRIBUTED	ASSETS UNDER MANAGEMENT (TOTAL MARKET VALUE)
Central government	2,261,514	**₹ 1,45,599 crore**	**₹ 2,12,652 crore**
State government	5,514,516	**₹ 2,62,978 crore**	**₹ 3,54,922 crore**
Corporate sector	1,359,101	**₹ 60,117 crore**	**₹ 83,767 crore**
Unorganised sector	2,038,082	**₹ 30,325 crore**	**₹ 29,776 crore**
NPS Swavalamban	4,189,395	**₹ 2,977 crore**	**₹ 4,629 crore**
Total	**15,362,608**	**₹ 5,01,995 crore**	**₹ 6,85,745 crore**

Government employees hired before January 1, 2004, get up to 50 per cent of their last drawn salaries as guaranteed pension amount with dearness relief linked to inflation announced every six months. Union finance ministry estimates say between 1993-94 and 2004-05, the ratio of pension expenditure to tax revenue showed a compound growth rate of 21 per cent for the Centre and 27 per cent for the states.

"The rising pension bill at all levels of government will be increasingly difficult to finance in the future, given the other demands on state resources, particularly for enhancing expenditure on essential social sectors such as health and education," former PM Manmohan Singh had said in 2007 while seeking support for the PFRDA (Pension Fund Regulatory and Development Authority) Bill. Even now, the Centre spends around 5 per cent of the total budgeted expenditure on the pensions of employees recruited before 2004. In the 2022-23 budget, the Centre will spend Rs 2,07,132 crore on pensions, which is 4.1 per cent higher than the revised estimate for 2021-22.

The other argument was that the old scheme denied employees the benefits of investing retirement funds in equities and earning higher returns. As Union MoS for finance Bhagwat Karad said in Parliament on February 7, the NPS was introduced "to provide old age income security in a fiscally sustainable manner and to channelise small savings into productive sectors of the economy through prudential investments".

Under the NPS, every government employee is allotted a permanent Retirement Account Number and has to mandatorily contribute 10 per cent of the pay and dearness allowance to the pension fund. The government contributes the same amount—10 per cent—which was hiked to 14 per cent in 2019. This money is invested in debt or equity, according to the employee's choice and said guidelines. The NPS is regulated by the PFRDA, which was

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OLD IS GOLD?
An anti-NPS protest by Himachal Pradesh government staff in Mandi, Feb. 23

given statutory status in 2011.

At the time of retirement, an employee can withdraw 60 per cent of the corpus but is required to invest at least 40 per cent to purchase an annuity from an insurance firm regulated by the government authorities. The interest on the annuity is to be provided as monthly pension to the employee. While in the old system, the pension was defined—50 per cent of last salary drawn—in NPS, the benefits are determined by factors such as amount contributed, age of joining, type of investment and returns on investment.

The NDA government gave further incentives to individuals with tax rebates for investing Rs 50,000 in the NPS. Considered one of the lowest cost pension products in the world, it now has over 15 million subscribers (see *The NPS Network*). Several NPS funds claim to give much better returns than what fixed deposits and the Employees' Provident Fund (EPF) offer currently.

However, a big section of government employees still feel the old pension system was more beneficial to them. They argue that for those retiring after 10-12 years, the accumulated money under NPS is too little and hence does not provide a substantial amount as pension. There is also the mistrust in market-linked schemes, and the fear that they may lose heavily if the market crashes at the time of their retirement. The pandemic-hit economy has done little to inspire hope. That the armed forces are still covered under the old scheme is also grating.

Economic experts, however, point to how the NPS has not only reduced the pension bill but also discouraged government practices such as reducing the number of recruits and filling up vacancies with contractual employees to avoid incurring expenses on pension.

Between April 1, 2016, and March 31, 2021, 1,718 employees of Rajasthan government retired under the NPS. But most of them were in low-grade jobs, appointed on compassionate grounds at a late age. Government sources claim most of these employees got Rs 5,000-8,000 less pension than what they would have got under the old scheme. However, for most of those who joined after 2004 and will start retiring after 2030, it's not yet clear what their final pension amount will be.

EMPLOYEES ARE WARY OF THE FACT THAT NPS IS MARKET-LINKED, FEARING THEY MAY LOSE HEAVILY IF THERE IS A CRASH

For now, Gehlot's announcement will cost the state exchequer nothing. The actual liability of the scheme will be felt after 2030 when the 2004 batch begins retiring. The state is yet to work out the modalities to shift the current contributory scheme to the previous one and, in a way, will defer its contributory liability of Rs 889 crore in the next financial year. The state's pension bill for 2021-22 was Rs 25,328 crore.

Speculation is rife that Gehlot, who has launched a series of populist schemes in the past two years (adding heavily to state expenses), is planning an early election. The chief minister is unruffled by criticism that he is pushing the state into a fiscal crisis. "My previous three budgets were also election budgets. I have been readying for polls the day I took over," he says. He even admits the Congress victories in six of the eight assembly byelections and local body polls in the past three years were due to these measures. Perhaps political gains matter more than fiscal prudence. And he is not alone, as the many states mulling the growing demand for the old pension system indicate. ■

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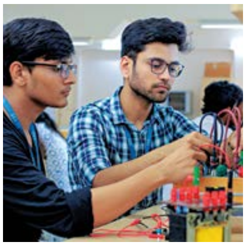

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MADHYA PRADESH

KAMAL NATH'S COLD START DOCTRINE

By Rahul Noronha

The Congress headquarters in Bhopal is a hive of activity—unusual given that the assembly election is only in 2023, and the party unit is used to 'coming alive' only when polls are near. Madhya Pradesh PCC chief and former chief minister Kamal Nath is making an early start, though. Nath, who had finally wrested the state from the BJP in 2018 only to lose it in 2020 when Jyotiraditya Scindia and his cohorts switched sides, knows that strengthening the organisation is crucial to take on the saffron regime, even one enervated by the long stint in power (2003-18 and then from 2020 on).

MP is crucial for the Congress as it is among the few states where the party's been able to stage a comeback, even take the fight to its principal adversary, the BJP. Moreover, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh, the other two Congress-led states going to polls in 2023, could be facing anti-incumbency. A wave in its favour in MP could act as ballast in the other two states.

Part of the reason for the early intervention is Nath's organised style of functioning, and his experience of his home bastion, Chhindwara, which has been a Congress fortress since 1980. So surveys are under way and reports and bios on possible candidates and party functionaries are being prepared. The 75-year-old Nath seems like a man on a mission, more so because he is now the go-to man for the Congress in MP, with few rivals in sight. Scindia's defection has, in that sense, liberated him. Besides being PCC chief, Nath is also leader of the opposition. Those within the Congress who were close to Scindia but did not go to the BJP with him, have now joined Nath's ranks.

Not that things will be easy for Nath. The state unit needs strengthening; many office-bearers left the party with Scindia and there aren't that many younger leaders of promise in the interiors. Recruitment drives to increase party membership will be a key focus area. For Nath, the critical unit of the party is the *mandalam* (sub-block level), something he's learnt from his successes in Chhindwara. To ensure the party organisation reaches the grassroots, the number of *mandalams* in each block are being increased. The number of district and block committees will also go up, say party sources. There are around 700 blocks currently, and this is likely to go up by around 10 per cent. The creation of more district, block and *mandalam* committees will also enable the party to dispense more posts. "Party workers get a sense of connect and purpose when they are given a post," says a state unit member.

The 31 assembly byelections since 2020, their results notwithstanding, have ensured that the party organisation has been working continuously. "We began preparations for the 2023 election the moment the 2020 byelections got over. It has been a continuous process since then," says MP Congress general secretary (administration), Rajiv Singh. The party has also been focusing on its various cells and frontal organisations in the state. Nath feels the cells have tremendous reach since they speak to members of the same social group, trade or profession. There are now 31 cells, with some of the new ones looking at consumer protection, rural industries, the physically challenged, senior citizens, NGOs. There's even a cell to take up the grievances of barbers.

> **FOR NATH, THE CRITICAL UNIT OF THE PARTY IS THE *MANDALAM*, SOMETHING HE LEARNT FROM HIS VICTORIES IN CHHINDWARA**

THE REVIVAL Kamal Nath at a Congress rally in Bhind, Feb. 23

Former minister P.C. Sharma has been given charge of countering the BJP's 'disinformation campaign' against the party. Congress workers will go through a training programme, Jan Jagran Abhiyan, and a *ghar chalo, ghar ghar chalo* campaign will have them going house-to-house to apprise the people of party programmes while clarifying its stand on local and national issues. "The idea is to equip party workers with facts to counter the BJP's bogus claims," says state Congress spokesperson Bhupendra Gupta. Meanwhile, the party membership drive continues. The state unit strength is now around 1.9 million (compared to the BJP's 10 million claim), but Rajiv Singh is confident they will have "5 million members on the basis of membership receipts" by the time the AICC president election rolls out in mid-2022.

CONGRESS PUSH FOR 2023

- Strengthen the party organisation at the grassroots level
- Training programmes for party workers to counter the BJP's 'disinformation campaign'
- Engage local leaders and workers at public meetings to keep up morale, create a buzz on social media and among the youth by raising their issues
- Work on unity among Congress leaders cutting across caste and regional lines

As for frontal organisations, the NSUI (National Students' Union of India) and Youth Congress are doing "satisfactory work". The Youth Congress, in fact, is running an '*ek booth, paanch youth*' programme, or five youth per booth. Party bosses, however, are unhappy with the Mahila Congress and Seva Dal. The old state Mahila Congress executive was scrapped, and Vibha Patel has been made the new president.

However, even with the overhaul and the new initiatives, there are certain legacy issues in the Congress Nath will find hard to overcome. Most importantly, unlike the BJP and its Hindutva-motivated cadre, ideological attachment to the Congress cause is very low. Attracting young, dedicated workers to the party has been difficult. In many booths, Congress membership has eroded to the extent of being absent. Even now, sitting MLAs or those who are ticket contenders are asked to appoint *mandalam* heads, so the primary allegiance is to the leader, not the party. Already, the appointment of *mandalam* in-charges has hit a rough patch in 30 per cent of the assembly seats.

The state leadership's soft-pedalling on the Hindutva front, be it pandering to cow politics or not taking a hard stand when Muslims and other minorities are attacked, is doing it no favour. In fact, Nath has left it to long-time friend and ally, ex-CM Digvijaya Singh, to ensure that the Congress's core issues, like concern for Dalits and minorities, are not ignored. The BJP has been attempting to drive a wedge between Nath and Digvijaya, claiming that all is not well between them. But party insiders say the two are on the same page on most issues.

Meanwhile, Nath is on overdrive at public meetings. Last week, he was in Rewa and Bhind, both areas where the Congress has seen setbacks. The idea is to enthuse workers and attempt to unite various Congress leaders by sharing the dais at such meetings. Nath has also been trying to draw youngsters in by highlighting the lack of work opportunities in MP. And he loses no opportunity to diss Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan. "I challenge Chouhan to present an account of the BJP's 17 years in power and I will present mine of 15 months," he said in Bhind. Chouhan is unlikely to take the bait, and it will be up to Nath to up the ante in the coming months. If he can keep up the pressure, the Congress veteran may yet get a chance to reclaim MP for the party. ■

IN SOLIDARITY
A candlelight vigil by Aliah University students in Kolkata on February 22

SUBIR HALDER

THE ANIS KHAN CASE

DEATH FOR DISSENT?

By Romita Datta

For the past two weeks, thousands of villagers have been keeping vigil at a two-storeyed, half-finished house in Sarada Dakshin Khan Pada in West Bengal's Howrah, 50 km from Kolkata. It is the home of student leader Anis Khan—and the very place where he died mysteriously late in the night on February 18. His family alleges the 28-year-old former student of Aliah University in Kolkata was murdered.

Anis's father Salaam claims that four men—one of them in police gear—had barged into his home looking for his son and pushed him off the second floor. They left, announcing "operation successful". The family scrambled to get help for Anis, who lay in a pool of blood, but most people in the village were away at a religious function nearby.

Politically active and, to many, 'anti-establishment', Anis was a vocal critic of some of the policies of the Mamata Banerjee government. He had also taken part in the protests against the Citizenship (Amendment) Act in 2019. His death, claimed by supporters as 'political murder', is now the subject of a special investigation team (SIT) probe ordered by the Trinamool Congress (TMC) government. The local police have registered a murder case, but the SIT probe is expected to reveal if they had mishandled the case. Salaam claims the local police station, in Amta block, sent a team to his house eight hours later, and only after he had shared pictures of Anis's body.

Sarada Dakshin Khan Pada is now brimming with police teams and senior SIT officers are paying daily visits. But this has done little to calm down the angry villagers. On February 26, hundreds of them grouped together to block a police party that had arrived at dawn to exhume Anis's body for a second postmortem, ordered by the courts. The body could be exhumed only two days later. Anis's family had contested the first postmortem saying it was conducted without their presence.

Former Bengal IGP Pankaj Dutta believes the police faltered on several counts—they responded to the distress call late and did not follow basic protocols, such as cordoning off the 'scene'. "Anis's father claims to be the principal witness and had offered to help draw sketches of the assailants, but the police took no initiative. The two suspects rounded up have apparently cleared the test identification parade," says Dutta.

Anis was an activist of prominent Furfura Sharif cleric Abbas Siddiqui's Indian Secular Front (ISF), which had contested the Bengal assembly poll last year in alliance with the Left and the Congress. Anis campaigned extensively for the ISF. Sarada Dakshin Khan Pada residents say his rising popularity may have earned him enemies as he was thought to have swung votes in the village in ISF’s favour.

In May 2021, soon after the poll results were declared, a group of men had allegedly ransacked Anis’s home, threatened to kill him and assaulted his uncle. They were allegedly led by a local panchayat office-bearer and a TMC booth-level leader. Anis sent a complaint to the police by post as he feared he was under watch. Friends recall a Facebook post by Anis around the time that he would ‘embrace death’ rather than ‘sell himself to brokers’.

With public faith in the police shaken, there is a strong demand for the case to be handed over to the CBI. “How can we rely on the state police when men in uniform held me at gunpoint and killed my son?” asks Salaam. Villagers wonder why the local police station in-charge was allowed to go on long leave when questioning him could have revealed whether policemen had indeed visited Anis’s home on the fateful night.

Politically active, Anis Khan was a vocal critic of the Mamata government and had taken part in the anti-CAA protests in 2019

Bengal has erupted against Anis’s death, with both political parties and civil rights groups taking to the streets to demand justice. The protests may intensify. “More than 20 demonstrations by various groups have been held [in Kolkata]. Expect more in the days to come,” says Mayukh Biswas, national general secretary of the left-wing Students’ Federation of India (SFI).

Dipsita Dhar, SFI’s all-India joint secretary, describes the protests as an “outcry for justice by sensible citizens”. “The crime perpetrated is an atrocity on students by an anarchic and autocratic government,” she says. A demonstration on February 26 in Amta was met with a lathi charge and 16 activists, including Democratic Youth Federation of India (DYFI) state secretary Meenakshi Mukherjee, were rounded up and charged with attempt to murder.

Not just students, Anis’s death is also mobilising the local Muslim community. “We are condemning the incident at our masjids. We have assured Anis’s family that we are with them and want the criminals to be arrested immediately,” says a Muslim cleric from Bargachhia, camping 20 km away at Anis’s village. Clerics from Furfura Sharif and other shrines have also been visiting the family.

Anis’s mysterious death has revived memories of Rizwanur Rahman, the computer graphics trainer who allegedly committed suicide in 2007 after being hounded by the police over his marriage to a Hindu woman. The TMC had used the case to corner the Left Front government of the time, and Mamata potentially faces a similar situation now. She can ill-afford the Anis Khan case being used by political opponents to mobilise Muslims, who make up a third of Bengal’s 100 million population and have sizeable numbers in 100 assembly seats.

‘*Bhulte pari amar naam, bhulbo nako Anis Khan* (We can forget our names but not Anis Khan’s)’. This slogan reverberating at the February 19 protest by hundreds of Aliah University students in the heart of Kolkata sums up the mood against the Mamata government: justice for Anis Khan and nothing less. ■

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FORKED TONGUES
An Adivasi Chhatra Sangh protest in Ranchi over the Bhojpuri-Magahi issue

SOMNATH SEN

JHARKHAND

Language Logjam

By Amitabh Srivastava

On February 18, the Hemant Soren-led government in Jharkhand issued a formal notification revoking the decision to include Bhojpuri and Magahi in the regional languages list for Bokaro and Dhanbad districts. A controversy had erupted on December 23 last year after the state government issued a notification to include the two dialects—usually identified with neighbouring Bihar more than with Jharkhand—as regional languages in the two districts. The decision set off an agitation, with members of the state's Adivasi (tribal) and Moolvasi (original inhabitants) communities protesting.

On the face of it, the protests are to do with employment opportunities as Jharkhand has made knowledge of a 'recognised local language' mandatory for Class III and IV category government jobs in the districts. However, if the Soren government expects to douse the controversy with the rollback, it may not be so easy. This is because Bhojpuri is still a recognised language in Palamu and Garhwa districts whereas Magahi has the same status in four other districts of Jharkhand. So, the possibility of similar protests fanning to other parts of the state cannot be ruled out.

With Jharkhand's current unemployment rate hovering at 11.3 per cent, the issue is a touchy one when it comes to district-level jobs of critical significance to local youth. But more than jobs, the language divide has also become a question of identity politics, pitting pro- and anti-Bihar forces against each other in Jharkhand. This is also why protesters have started demanding that land records from the year 1932 be made the cut-off date for anyone to be identified as an original resident of Jharkhand. There are also demands to invalidate the previous Raghubar Das government's 'relaxed domicile policy' that included criteria such as employment for the past 30 years and 1985 as the cut-off year to be identified as an original resident of the state.

Bihar chief minister Nitish Kumar is among those who oppose the move to drop the two languages. He has questioned the exclusion of the two languages and reminded everyone that Bihar and Jharkhand share a common culture and languages. Nitish has not taken any names, nor criticised his Jharkhand counterpart directly, but the reaction of other political forces may not be as measured. While Nitish leads an NDA government in alliance with the BJP in Bihar, the saffron party is the main opposition in Jharkhand where Soren's Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM) leads a government in alliance with the Congress and Rashtriya Janata Dal.

Nitish's argument of a common culture does have some merit. Hived off from Bihar in November 2000, many in the parent state still see Jharkhand as their own. Of the state's 24 districts, as many as 10 share borders with Bihar, which validates the logic of a shared common culture, languages and relations. In fact, the influence of other states in Jharkhand is a given, considering that barring one district (Lohardaga), the other 23 share borders with other states.

So, while a section of Jharkhand politicians insist on promoting an 'exclusive' culture in the name of safeguarding cultural identity, geography plays spoiler in the argument. But then, opposing Bihar is a core theme of many Jharkhand-based parties, including JMM. This is perhaps also why there have been few protests against the inclusion of languages like Bangla, Odiya and even Urdu as regional languages in many districts. Given Jharkhand's current emotionally-charged situation, one has yet to hear the final word on the war of the languages. ■

> **More than jobs, the language divide has become a question of identity politics, pitting pro- and anti-Bihar forces against each other in Jharkhand**

GLASSHOUSE

PRESIDENTIAL PAWAR?

Going by the several rounds of meetings among Opposition leaders, you would think they are ready with a united alliance against the ruling BJP for the 2024 Lok Sabha election. But the real motive behind these parleys seems to be finding a common candidate for the July presidential election. Sources in the Opposition camp claim Nationalist Congress Party patriarch Sharad Pawar has expressed an interest. In the past three months, two chief ministers—West Bengal's Mamata Banerjee and Telangana's K. Chandrashekar Rao—have met Pawar in Mumbai. The expectation is that the BJP's numbers in Uttar Pradesh will go down, helping the non-BJP forces put up a tougher contest against the saffron party's candidate. However, an unscheduled meeting between Union minister Piyush Goyal and Pawar at the latter's Mumbai home on the day of Lata Mangeshkar's funeral has confounded observers. Pawar's unpredictability, after all, is legendary.

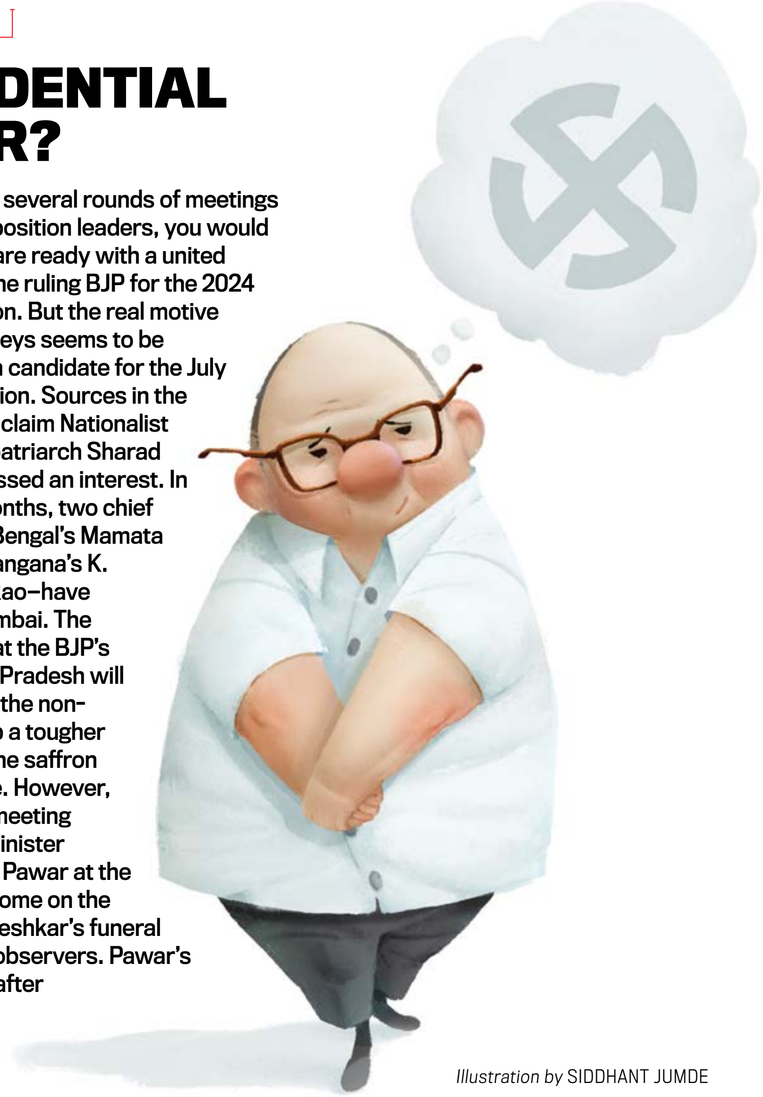


Illustration by SIDDHANT JUMDE

Federal Friction

Telangana chief minister **K. Chandrashekar Rao** dispensed with the convention of the governor addressing the legislature at the start of the budget session, which fell on March 7 this year, also the first session of 2022. His logic? The previous session of the legislative assembly, which ended on October 8, was not prorogued. KCR was also peeved that governor Tamilisai Sounderarajan did not rely entirely on the government's text in her Republic Day address. Moreover, KCR, along with other states, is bracing for a pitched battle for federal rights against the Union government.

SwaRaj Bhavans

Maharashtra governor **Bhagat Singh Koshyari** has mooted the idea to rename the several British-era halls in Raj Bhavans across the country after Indian saints. To begin with, he has suggested that 'Darbar Hall' in Mumbai be renamed 'Samarth Hall' after Samarth Ramdas, the 17th-century saint in Maharashtra. Koshyari also has a plan to put up photographs of armed freedom-fighters in his official residence. If only the Union and state governments clear his brainwave.

PTI

Page Turner

Realising perhaps that the pen is mightier than the sword, Trinamool Congress strongman **Anubrata Mondal** has written an autobiography, titled *Khela Hobe*. The memoir traces his transition from the unassuming boy Keshto to the hard-hitting politician who is alleged to have won several political battles by flexing his muscles. Also known for his unparliamentary language, laced often with the choicest invective, the book comes as a refreshing change. Instead of dripping poison, the pen has produced some insight.

OFF-COLOUR

Budgets are one time opposition parties can corner ruling governments, but in Rajasthan the BJP ended up scoring a self-goal. First, state BJP chief **Satish Poonia** compared the budget with a "dark-complexioned bride who is made to look good with make-up at a beauty parlour". Then, he apologised for the sexist comment but tried to get even by announcing that he and other BJP MLAs will return the iPhones the Ashok Gehlot government had gifted all MLAs. These days, local media is agog with how many BJP MLAs have returned the iPhone, willingly or otherwise, how many have already started using it and how many have gifted it to their wives or children.

—Kaushik Deka with Amarnath K. Menon, Kiran D. Tare, Romita Datta and Rohit Parihar

COVER STORY

WAR IN UKRAINE

THE FALLOUT

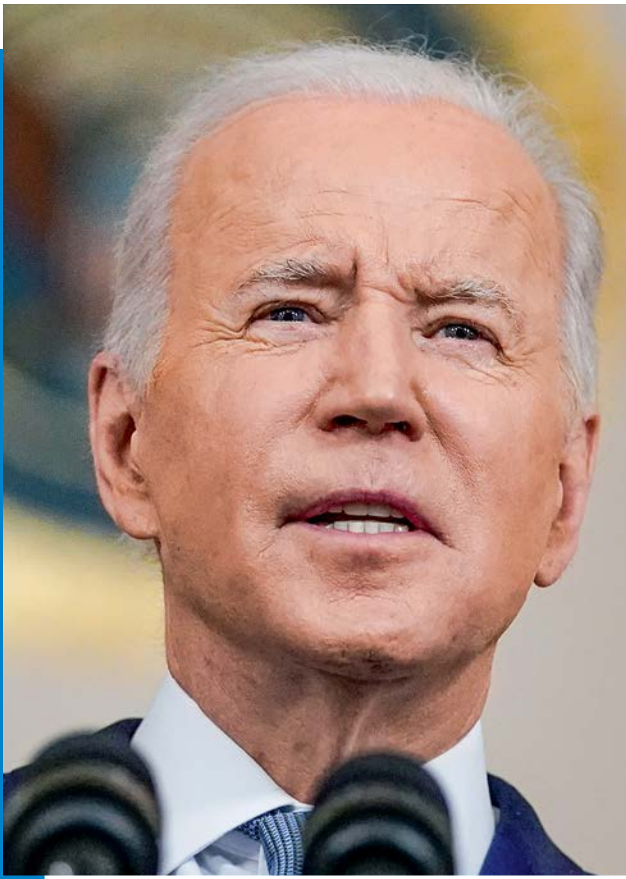
SCENES FROM A WAR (clockwise from far left) bombing in Kharkiv; Ukrainian tanks; Vladimir Putin; pro-Russia separatists; wreckage of Russian military vehicles

AS RUSSIA'S VLADIMIR PUTIN SETS OUT TO SUBJUGATE UKRAINE, WHAT IS THE COST INDIA, HIS OWN COUNTRY AND THE WORLD WILL HAVE TO PAY?

By RAJ CHENGAPPA

Photos: GETTY IMAGES, REUTERS, AP AND AFP

AP

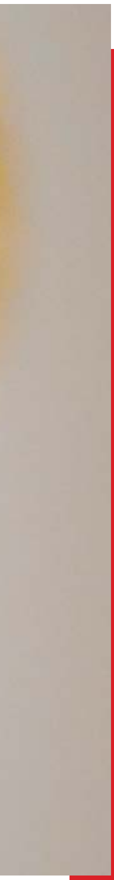


GETTY IMAGES

IN

HOMER'S EPIC *ODYSSEY*, Ulysses, the legendary Greek king, while journeying on the Mediterranean, found himself caught between Scylla and Charybdis, two mythical sea monsters that inhabited the opposite shores of the Strait of Messina near Italy. He was advised to lose a few sailors to Scylla rather than surrender his ship and entire crew to the more-feared Charybdis. Aeons later, Russian president Vladimir Putin believed he was confronting a Ulyssean dilemma. A creeping effort by countries allied to the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) to encircle Russia—a containment strategy unfolding over a span of three decades—posed an existential threat to his once-great nation. His choices? Either wage war on Ukraine, Russia's immediate neighbour, which was keen to join the western alliance, or swallow the affront and watch Russia being treated as a pygmy in the emerging new world order.

Putin chose what he thought was the lesser of the two evils—subdue Ukraine before the western powers subdued Russia. Italian strategist Niccolo Machiavelli would have advised the same—"There is no avoiding war; it can only be postponed to the advantage of others." So, on February 24, the Russian president launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, setting in motion the largest-ever land battle waged in Europe since World War II. As Russia's massive armoured assault enters its second week, Putin's motive becomes increasingly clear—total subjugation of Ukraine,



WESTWARD DRIFT
US president Joe Biden; Ukrainian counterpart Volodymyr Zelensky

including a regime change that would make it a vassal state of Russia as it was before the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. He even threatened to go nuclear if NATO interfered in his war, ominously warning "of consequences you have never faced in your history". There is every danger that a miscalculation on either side could push the world towards a catastrophic World War III, which former US defence secretary William Cohen says would result in "not just the end of history but of civilisation itself".

WHY PUTIN WENT TO WAR

As the fighting raged in Ukraine, round one of the information war went to the West, with Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky, a comedian-turned-politician, hailed for his resilience and bravery in not abandoning ship. Putin, on the other hand, was accused of suffering delusions of grandeur, with some even comparing him to a demented King Lear. But is there a method to Putin's seeming madness? There seems to be one. For one, the former KGB spy and judoka-turned-politician has now ruled Russia with an iron fist for over 21 years. When he took over in 2000, Russia was disunited, dejected and reduced to third-world country status. Putin rapidly consolidated control in his hands by reining in the oligarchs who had thrived in the Wild West kind of capitalism that took hold after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Leveraging the country's oil resources (Russia is now one of the world's largest suppliers of oil and gas), Putin rebuilt the economy, modernised the country's formidable military and also brought unity and order to Russia's 85 Oblasts (provinces).

PUTIN WANTED A US ASSURANCE THAT UKRAINE WOULD NOT BE ALLOWED IN NATO. BIDEN THOUGHT HIS DEMANDS WOULDN'T STOP AT THAT

He then positioned himself as a new Tsar, terming the 1991 dissolution of the Soviet Union as "the greatest geopolitical disaster of the 20th century". He lashed out at NATO for incorporating erstwhile Soviet satellites and republics as members (14 since 1991), contrary to US assurances that it would not intrude into the Russian sphere of influence. In 2008, when Georgia pushed for NATO membership, Putin launched a military operation to establish two of its breakaway regions—South Ossetia and Abkhazia—as independent republics. Ukraine, too, had applied for NATO membership the same year. In 2014, when pro-Russian president Viktor Yanukovych was ousted from power, Putin executed a bloodless annexation of Crimea, a peninsula on the Black Sea the Soviet Union had transferred to Ukraine in 1954.

While the West imposed fresh sanctions on Russia and its economy took a hit, Putin's own popularity soared on the back of the Crimean annexation. Emboldened, he orchestrated a Russian-backed insurgency in two other regions of Ukraine—Donetsk and Luhansk in the east—bordering Russia with the aim of creating a land corridor to Crimea. Ukraine, headed then by a new pro-West president, Petro Poroshenko, signed a ceasefire protocol with Russia and the separatists in Minsk in September 2014, but with no side keeping to its terms, that broke down. At this stage, France and Germany stepped in to broker a deal called Minsk 2 between Russia and Ukraine in February 2015: the conditions this time explicitly guaranteed that these two regions were to have greater autonomy, while ensuring that Ukraine would have control of its national borders here. However, hostilities between pro-Russian and nationalist forces in the region continued to escalate. And when Zelensky was elected in April 2019 with a landslide majority, he pushed hard for membership to the European Community (EC) and NATO. Meanwhile, he took British help to set up a naval base in Odessa, and the US supplied sophisticated arms worth over $2 billion to bolster the Ukrainian armed forces.

For Putin, Zelensky had crossed the invisible red line. "If Ukraine joined NATO, it would be like a permanent dagger pointed at Russia's throat. Imagine India's reaction if Nepal entered into a military alliance with China, including having missiles directed at us? Would we sit back and watch?" asks Bala Venkatesh Varma, a former Indian ambassador to Russia. Putin then threatened decisive military action by amassing Russian troops on the Ukrainian border unless the US gave a firm commitment that it would not admit Ukraine into NATO and end its expansion in the region. The Russian strongman also upped the ante by demanding a rollback of the previous admission of erstwhile Soviet Republics into NATO, removal of US nuclear weapons stationed in Europe and a formal recognition of Russia's security interests in the region, mainly Belarus, Ukraine and Georgia.

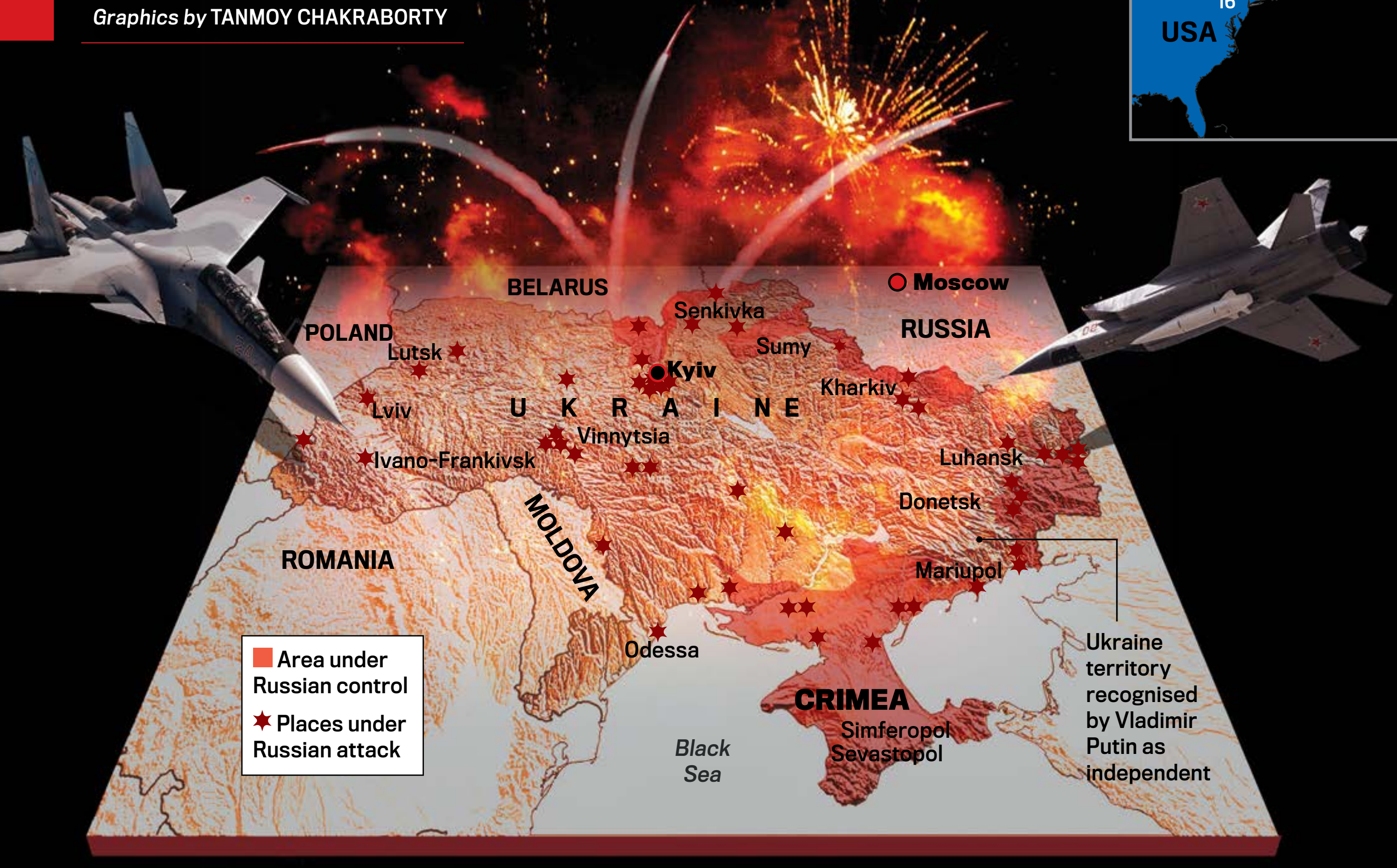
RUSSIA AND UKRAINE

A TORTURED HISTORY

Graphics by TANMOY CHAKRABORTY

The second-largest country in Europe after Russia, Ukraine was born in 1991 after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The separation created several points of friction between Russia and Ukraine, from the status of disputed Crimea to the ownership of the erstwhile Soviet Union's Black Sea fleet and its nuclear weapons emplaced in Ukraine. A look at how the festering confrontations led to the current crisis.

CANADA
15
16
USA


BELARUS
Moscow
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POLAND
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Senkivka
Sumy
Kyiv
Kharkiv
Lviv
U K R A I N E
Vinnytsia
Ivano-Frankivsk
Luhansk
Donetsk
MOLDOVA
ROMANIA
Mariupol
Odessa
CRIMEA
Simferopol
Sevastopol
Black Sea
Ukraine territory recognised by Vladimir Putin as independent
🟥 Area under Russian control
✶ Places under Russian attack

AUG. 1991

As the Soviet Union dissolves, Ukraine's parliament declares independence; a public referendum ratifies it. Unresolved issues between Ukraine and Russia include the USSR's military assets, including nukes and ships in the Black Sea.

MAY 1997

The two countries formalise division of Black Sea fleet. Russia acquires the majority in exchange for payment/ financial considerations

NOV. 2004

The pro-Kremlin Viktor Yanukovych wins the 2004 presidential polls against the pro-West **Viktor Yushchenko**. Alleging rigging, Yushchenko's supporters stage mass protests. The 'Orange Revolution' heralds a westward shift in Ukraine's politics. Yushchenko wins in fresh polls to become president.

FEB. 2005

Ukraine seeks NATO membership, gets US support. Talks begin.

APR. 2008

Putin says NATO's eastward expansion is a direct threat to Russia

AUG. 2008

Georgian president **Mikheil Saakashvili** pushes for Georgia to join NATO. Russia takes control of breakaway Georgian regions South Ossetia and Abkhazia, declares them independent.

FEB. 2010

Yanukovych wins presidential polls, pushing Ukraine back into Kremlin's orbit

NOV. 2013

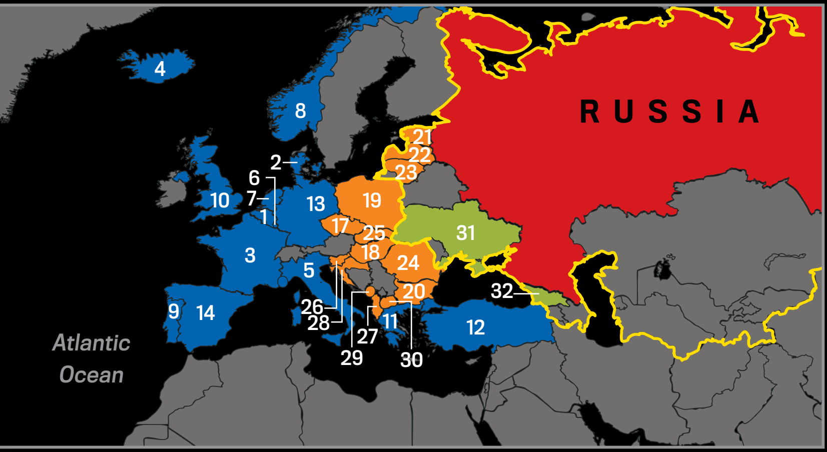
Euromaidan protests break out in Kyiv after Yanukovych refuses to sign 'association agreement' with EU that was to set the stage for removal of trade/ travel barriers

MAR. 2014

Russia formally annexes Crimea, including Sevastopol naval base

JUNE 2014

Ukraine's parliament votes to remove **Yanukovych**, who had fled the country in February. Presidential elections are held and Petro Poroshenko, a pro-West billionaire businessman, is elected. Tensions



NATO ENCIRCLEMENT

NATO's expansion after 1991 has been aided by the inclusion of several former eastern bloc countries

● 1949-1982

1. Belgium 2. Denmark
3. France 4. Iceland 5. Italy
6. Luxembourg 7. Netherlands
8. Norway 9. Portugal
10. United Kingdom 11. Greece
12. Turkey 13. Germany
14. Spain 15. Canada
16. United States

● AFTER 1991

17. Czech Republic
18. Hungary 19. Poland
20. Bulgaria 21. Estonia
22. Latvia 23. Lithuania
24. Romania 25. Slovakia
26. Slovenia 27. Albania
28. Croatia 29. Montenegro
30. North Macedonia

● KNOCKING AT NATO's DOOR

31. Ukraine, 32. Georgia

rise as Poroshenko pushes for Ukraine's integration with Europe and NATO.

FEB. 2015

Pro-Russian separatists begin uprising in east Ukraine's Donetsk and Luhansk. France and Germany broker Minsk 2 pact where Ukraine agrees to decentralisation of powers to these regions.

APR. 2019

Volodymyr Zelenskyy, a former comedian, wins Ukrainian presidential election. He is pro-West and disputes the terms of the Minsk agreement with Russia; declares Ukraine will join NATO.

JUNE 2020

NATO upgrades Ukraine to 'enhanced opportunities partner'. Between late 2020 and end-2021, Russia builds up forces along Ukraine's eastern and northern borders. Putin warns NATO to keep off Ukraine.

FEB. 21, 2022

Russia recognises Donetsk and Luhansk as independent regions, sends in troops to reinforce territorial claims. On **Feb. 24,** Russia invades Ukraine.

America's concern was that Russia would not stop at these demands. Putin seemed intent on restoring Russia's past glory. As a perceptive report this January by the think-tank Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), authored by Seth C. Jones, its vice president, and Philip C. Wasielewski, a former CIA officer, noted: "Russian annexation of some or all of Ukraine would increase Russian manpower, industrial capacity and natural resources to a level that could make it a global threat. The US and Europe cannot make this mistake again."

US President Joe Biden refused to come to any agreement with Russia, saying there were no recent moves to admit Ukraine or Georgia to NATO. Germany and France had in 2008 made their opposition to Ukraine's entry to NATO explicit, effectively blocking any such move. Ashley Tellis, senior fellow at the international think-tank Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (CEIP), says, "These countries want to join European institutions because they have horrible memories of being under Soviet rule for 70 years. My view is that the threat of NATO expansion is just an excuse by Putin to go about his ambition of recovering whatever he can of the erstwhile Soviet Union." The US administration then warned the world that Russia was on the brink of an invasion, which Shiv Shankar Menon, former National Security Advisor, says, "ironically, goaded Putin into invading Ukraine—else he would seem chicken". P.S. Raghavan, a former chairman of the National Security Advisory Board, agrees: "The war is a result of a basic failure of diplomacy by key NATO members."

EUROPE STRIKES BACK

While invading Ukraine, Putin gambled on a shock-and-awe approach that he hoped would bring Zelensky to his knees in the first week itself, with minimum civilian casualties. It also relied on the assumption that a disunited Europe and disengaged US would have no stomach to join battle. With Russia sitting on $600 billion in forex reserves, its president had enough treasure to withstand any sanctions imposed. "Putin is willing to take enormous risks and is tactically smart," says Tellis, "though capable of strategic blunders—as Hitler was." His military calculations seem to have initially gone off the mark, with the Ukrainians putting up stiff resistance.

But, as a senior official points out, “Ukraine is Europe’s second largest country with a population of 44 million and can’t be easily overrun. Putin would have factored in all exigencies, including his opponents’ punitive action.”

The Russian president thus first took down Ukraine’s air defence system with a series of missile strikes, gaining dominance of the skies. Simultaneously, he sent troops to secure Donetsk and Luhansk—regions that would help him gain a partial land corridor to Crimea. Next, he focused on Kharkiv, Ukraine’s second largest city, where he blew up key government buildings, gaining a semblance of control. (It was in this assault that Indian student Naveen S.G. was killed along with other Ukrainian civilians.) Simultaneously, Russian troops laid siege to Kyiv, encircling it from three sides, with satellite pictures showing a 60-km-long line of tanks and armoured vehicles moving towards the capital. In line with Putin’s calculations and much to Zelensky’s dismay, no country, including the US, was willing to put boots on the ground or take on the Russian armed forces directly.

What Putin perhaps did not expect was the stringent economic sanctions Europe, the US and Japan would retaliate with. Strongest among the measures was cutting off several key Russian banks from SWIFT, the global messaging service for financial transactions, which put instant pressure on Moscow. Raghavan calls it “the financial equivalent of pressing the nuclear button, rarely employed”. The European response too was a united, cohesive one, as country after country instituted measures that promised to go well beyond immediate economic sanctions.

As Emmanuel Lenain, the French ambassador to India, points out, “there was a gross miscalculation on Putin’s part—he was expecting Europe to be disunited and instead found the opposite. A strong united front emerged, especially on defence”. He adds, “Importantly, European countries like Germany are now joining France in spending two per cent of their GDP on defence, apart from supplying significant arms to help Ukraine resist the invasion. With the sanctions, we have made life difficult for Russia and that impact is visible in the Russian rouble sinking by a margin of 30 per cent. It shows that sanctions are biting.” But sanctions could hurt Europe too, as many countries depend on Russia for their energy needs (Germany imports 60 per cent of its gas from it), besides other major commodities, culminating in inflationary trends.

SHYAM SARAN
Former foreign secretary

“The US identifying Russia as its main adversary instead of China will affect Quad, of which India is a part”

BALA VENKATESH VARMA
Former Indian ambassador to Russia

“If we commit to either side, it’ll be like issuing a blank cheque they’d cash on with no guarantee for our concerns”

INDIA’S TIGHTROPE WALK

When the invasion began, the immediate worry for India was the evacuation of the 20,000-plus students in various universities in Ukraine. That mission acquired fresh urgency after a student was killed in the Russian bombardment of Kharkiv. “Our foremost priority,” foreign secretary Harsh Shringla admitted, “was to get our citizens, especially students, out of the conflict zone and we put all our equities in that direction. In the meanwhile, we advocated diplomacy and dialogue to solve issues and refrain from hostilities. We kept our lines of communication open with all parties involved.” The Modi government launched a massive evacuation programme, Operation Ganga, setting up 24x7 control centres, pressing Indian airliners to send out special flights and deploying four Union ministers as special envoys to key neighbouring countries to coordinate the efforts. By March 1, over 9,000 students had been evacuated and most of the others had been moved out of the conflict zones.

Then there was the diplomatic tightrope India had to walk on the invasion itself. It found itself somewhat in the same position as when Russia invaded Afghanistan in 1979—sure enough, India abstained from condemning it this time too. Then, as now, India remains highly

P.S. RAGHAVAN
Ex-chairman, National Security Advisory Board

“Excluding Russian banks from SWIFT is the financial equivalent of pressing the nuclear button, rarely employed”

ANDREW SMALL
German Marshall Fund, US

“It’s not just a Russia question but a Russia enabled by China one. Europe’s been explicit about Beijing’s involvement”

EMMANUEL LENAIN
French ambassador to India

“Sanctions have made life difficult for Russia, the impact visible in the rouble sinking by a margin of 30 per cent”

HARISH SHRINGLA
Foreign secretary

“Our foremost priority was to get our students out. We put all our equities in that direction”

dependent on Russia for its defence purchases, both for conventional and strategic needs. Over 90 per cent of equipment for the Indian army’s requirements, 65 per cent for the air force’s needs and 41 per cent for the navy’s, is of Russian origin. In addition, deals worth over $15 billion are in the pipeline, for everything from ships, aircraft and tanks to assault rifles and missiles. On the list is the controversial Triumf S-400 air defence system that has come under US scrutiny as it falls under CAATSA or the Countering America’s Adversaries through Sanctions Act (see *Our Russian Arms*).

WHAT PUTIN DID NOT EXPECT WAS THE UNITED EUROPEAN RESPONSE AND THE SWIFT SANCTIONS THEY WOULD RETALIATE WITH

Menon believes all these constitute good reasons for India not to choose sides in this battle. “The US just cannot replace Russia for us,” he says. “Are the Americans willing to give you a nuclear submarine on lease, as Russia has done? Or help build nuclear reactors for India long before the Nuclear Suppliers Group permitted it, as Russia did? Apart from that, Russia is allowing us to co-develop state-of-the-art fighter aircraft while the US has so far not put that on the table.” Varma points to the more than billion dollars worth of small parts for defence equipment India is dependent on Russia for. “Just to cite an odd example, can your MiG29 fly without wiper blade replacement parts?” he asks.

While India’s defence relations with Russia remain robust, regular bilateral trade is far below potential. Last year, trade between the two countries totalled $9.4 billion compared to the $113 billion with the US, India's largest trading partner. Imports from Russia account for just 1.5 per cent of India’s total and are dominated by crude oil and fertilisers. Exports to Russia are a minuscule 0.8 per cent of the total, comprising largely electrical equipment and pharmaceutical products. However, India has made significant investments in Russian oilfields to meet its future energy requirements. With several Russian banks

OUR RUSSIAN ARMS

The international sanctions on Russia following its invasion of Ukraine could have an impact on ongoing defence deals with India, including for the Triumf S-400 missile platform and the $375 million joint venture with the DRDO to export BrahMos missiles to the Philippines. The Indian armed forces are highly dependent on Russian military hardware.

INDUCTED KIT

ARMY

Russian T-72 and T-90 battle tanks are the mainstay of the Indian Army's armoured strength

AIR FORCE

Of the 667 aircraft in the IAF's ground attack fleet, over 70 per cent are of Russian origin. All six air-refuelling flying tankers with India are Russian-made Ilyushin-78s.

NAVY

The INS *Vikramaditya* is a refurbished Russian Kiev-class carrier, and many of the aircraft it carries–like MiG-29Ks–are of Russian origin. The fleet also includes four guided-missile destroyers, six frigates, one nuclear-powered submarine and eight diesel-powered submarines of Russian origin.

denied access to SWIFT, India's trade will be affected. Simultaneously, the rise in international oil prices—they breached the $100 a barrel mark and touched $116 within a week of the invasion—threaten to fuel inflationary trends, bringing pain to the economy and the common man (see accompanying report, *How India will be Hit*).

So, even as the US and Europe pressured India to support condemnatory statements against Russia in the UN Security Council, India chose to tread the middle path. It abstained from voting on the resolutions, but put out an explanatory note that was fairly critical of Russia. India stated that it valued the territorial integrity and sovereignty of all states, stood for respecting international law and believed in diplomacy and dialogue, calling for an immediate cessation of all hostilities. "We are essentially telling Russia that we don't like what you are doing but we will not vote against you," Raghavan says, "which is alright." A senior MEA official adds, "We need to keep our lines of communication open with all parties concerned, take care of our interests wherever they are, including in terms of the equities we have. If we commit ourselves either way, we will not be able to do so. We also can't afford to burn our bridges." Varma puts it bluntly: "Once we commit ourselves to either side, it will be like issuing a blank cheque they would cash on with no guarantee to take care of our concerns."

THE CHINA SHADOW

Ironically, India found itself on the same side as China in the UNSC, as Beijing too abstained from voting. In 2008, China had not come out in open support of Russia's military action in Georgia, nor has it recognised its 2014 annexation of Crimea so far. But then the world's two most powerful autocrats—Putin and Chinese president Xi Jinping—signed a far-reaching agreement on February 7, just two weeks before the Russian invasion. The 5,000-word joint communique, covering a whole range of issues, stated: 'Friendship between the two states has no limits. There are no forbidden areas of cooperation.' It brought the two countries closer than ever before, while clearly challenging NATO's role in international security, and questioning the US' dominance as a global power and the liberal world order.

Having China firmly on his side emboldened Putin to

DEALS IN PROCESS

SHIPS

Four Admiral Grigorivich-class stealth frigates, two to be built in India in a deal worth roughly $4 billion. In March 2019, India signed an agreement to lease one Akula-class nuclear submarine, *Chakra III*, for $3 billion.

AIRCRAFT

200 Kamov 226-T helicopters, 140 of which were to be built in India for about $1 billion. India is also in advanced talks with Russia for 12 Sukhoi Su-30MKI aircraft, to be built in the country by Hindustan Aeronautics Ltd at a cost of about Rs 10,730 crore.

OTHERS

On the table is a deal to buy 464 T-90MS battle tanks, at about $1.9 billion. India and Russia recently signed a deal under which some 600,000 AK 203-7 assault rifles will be manufactured under licence at a factory in Amethi.

MISSILES

Import plans include ammunition and ordnance for various existing rocket platforms, including man-portable 'very short range' defence systems. There is an ongoing deal for five Triumf S-400 missile defence systems for nearly $5.5 billion, of which four are yet to be delivered.

TREADING A MIDDLE PATH, INDIA ABSTAINED FROM VOTING IN THE UNSC, BUT PUT OUT AN EXPLANATORY NOTE FAIRLY CRITICAL OF RUSSIA

proceed with his Ukraine invasion. As Andrew Small, a Senior Transatlantic Fellow at German Marshall Fund of the US and a China expert, says, "This is not just a Russia question. It is a 'Russia enabled by China' question, and European leaders have been remarkably explicit about Beijing's involvement in the Security Council on this." The broader fear for the European security order, according to Small, is that if Putin succeeds in Ukraine, he is likely to move in menacingly on the Baltic states. So, one has to draw the red line early. By imposing tough sanctions, the US and Europe are also sending China a clear warning of the consequences it would face if it tried to take Taiwan by force. Tellis agrees. "China ought to learn from Russia's Ukraine experience," he says. "If they had any romantic notions of getting the Taiwanese to surrender in 48 hours, they should now know how wrong they could be—that they might have to pay a much heavier price." Adds Menon, "Nobody in Taiwan is inviting Xi to come in, for him to claim it is a threat to his security. The cost is also in terms of how much Chinese blood he is willing to spill."

Former foreign secretary Shyam Saran says the main concern is that it may suit China to use Russia as a cat's paw to disrupt America's pivot to Asia. As he puts it, "If the US identifies Russia as its main adversary and gets embroiled in European security issues, it will obviously dilute its earlier projection that China is the biggest challenge. This has implications for its Indo-Pacific strategy and the Quad grouping, of which India is a part." Varma concurs, saying, "China must be laughing and doing the *bhangra* all the way to the bank. Russia is now like a geopolitical ATM for it." He also believes that with Russia likely to be considerably weakened by the war, "the gates of Central Asia are now open for China to walk in and take control."

Tellis, though, begs to differ, arguing that there is a difference between the two issues. "The China problem," he says, "derives from strength compared to the crisis in Europe, which implicates Russia, a fundamentally weak power. America cannot afford to dissipate its resolve or resources when dealing with China. But we are a superpower and can deal with both these threats simultaneously." Nor will China want to get too closely entangled in Russia's problems and turn fully against the US and Europe for Moscow's sake. Relations with both of them are vital to China's economy. "China," says Menon, "knows just how dependent it is on the US and they are not fools to be isolated and cut off from the global economy. They can't live without the US, without access to the US technology and its market."

A NEW WORLD DISORDER?

When Putin decided to invade Ukraine, part of his plan was to carve a new European order that "would recognise the important role and status of Russia as it had been completely marginalised by Europe", in Saran's words. Menon goes so far as to say that there is no world order in the first place. "Isn't it a fact that no European or American is willing to stand up and fight for Ukraine?" he asks. Saran too believes the pandemic exposed the lack of a world order as nations were unable to work together to meet a major security threat, ending up with vaccine nationalism rather than cooperation.

Tellis believes this may be overstating the case as the western liberal order is still dominant, with all its norms and institutions intact, albeit under some strain. For Menon, the aftermath of the Ukraine conflict will not be a make-or-break moment for the world. Reason: the world will have to deal with the second-order effects of a war that will see energy and commodity prices hit the roof and a much slower global economy. While there is likely to be a consolidation of the China-Russia axis, a distracted US will have shrinking bandwidth to deal with global problems. "The world is actually in a big mess," says Menon. "We are in transition between global orders. When it comes to the economy, we are multipolar, but with regard to military power, we are unipolar, with the US still the only country able to project its power globally."

If the China-Russia axis emerges stronger after the Ukraine crisis, some scholars predict the start of a new Cold War and even a new Iron Curtain. Yet others argue that it will be nothing like the Cold War that existed between the US and the erstwhile USSR, which had a strong military and ideological basis. Also, Europe had become the central geopolitical fault line of the world. But then its GDP fell from 30 per cent of global GDP in 1980 to around 16 per cent by 2016 and it stopped mattering—it no longer had the military clout or the economic power. Menon says that the world's biggest geopolitical fault lines have now shifted to Asia where there are many zones of conflict and nuclear powers jostling around.

Amidst all the flux, a new multipolar world is emerging—one that will perhaps be less stable and more dangerous. So, where does that leave India? Foreign minister S. Jaishankar perhaps has the answer—"India will have convergence with many nations but congruence with none." Raghavan talks of having a joint venture with Russia and the US rather than alliances. Saran believes that after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, "on balance, whether we like it or not, India will have to stand more towards the West. What other alternative do we have if our main adversary is China? India will still be looking for those who share our concerns about Chinese expansion and try to work together again."

ASHLEY J. TELLIS
Carnegie Endowment

> "The NATO expansion threat is an excuse by Putin to recover whatever he can of the former Soviet Union"

SHIVSHANKAR MENON
Former National Security Advisor

> "The US can't replace Russia for us. Will Americans give you a nuclear submarine on lease, as Russia did?"

India has hard choices to make, especially when it comes to the question of self-interest versus principles. In these turbulent times, experts concur that strategic autonomy should remain its lodestar. India needs to look out for itself first and safeguard its interests while balancing the extremes. Varma's advice: "We are entering an unknown new world. It is not a world of the brave but of the sensible." Both bravery and good sense may dictate that, sooner rather than later, India will have to get off the fence. ■

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‘What is the point of a job when you don’t have a country?’

INDIA TODAY TV’S **GAURAV C. SAWANT** IS IN KYIV COVERING THE CONFLICT. HIS ON-THE-SPOT REPORT

Commander Igor scans the skies as another air raid siren goes off in Ukraine's capital Kyiv. The Russians have systematically targeted Ukraine’s airfields and air defence assets. Igor’s unit has been tasked to defend the main axis to Kyiv from the east.

Young soldiers use earth movers and diggers to dig trenches and build fortifications. Civilians, including women, rush to help, bringing food, water and even manning barricades and roadblocks, checking for suspicious activity or subversive elements. “Russian special forces and Chechen fighters are coming to assassinate President (Volodymyr) Zelensky... we have to stop the enemy at the gates,” he tells INDIA TODAY.

For the defence of Kyiv, multiple levels of security are in place. The army with its tanks and armoured personnel carriers backed by troops with anti-tank guided missiles and surface-to-air missiles man the roads. The second line of defence are local militias with assault rifles.

“We are waiting for Carl Gustaf systems, Javelin anti-tank guided missiles (ATGMs) and Stinger missiles. We have the will power, we need the weapons,” says Misha Michael, a militia commander. Misha is an IT professional but gave up his job to defend Kyiv. “What is the point of a job when you don’t have a country? We cannot let Russia take over Ukraine,” he says.

There is no lack of will but the acute shortage of weapons, including ATGMs and SAMs, will affect Ukraine’s fightback against Russia. “I am willing to join the fight. This is a fight for freedom,” says Oksana, a mother of two in Kyiv. Oksana is also preparing her children, including a pre-teen daughter, for the war ahead.

It’s barely 10 days since Kyiv saw its first air raid (February 24) and the capital already resembles a ghost city. A long week of air raid sirens and missile strikes has resulted in a mass exodus of people from the once bustling capital of Ukraine.

THERE IS NO LACK OF WILL BUT THE SHORTAGE OF WEAPONS, INCLUDING ATGMs AND SAMs, WILL AFFECT UKRAINE’S FIGHTBACK

The situation is even more grim in Kharkiv, the second largest city of Ukraine, barely 30 km from the Russian border. Intense shelling has reduced pockets of the city to rubble. “Kharkiv was a rude shock for the Russian army. They must have thought they would get a rousing reception when they came into Kharkiv. But there was fierce resistance and they were repeatedly pushed back,” says Olexander Turkin, a popular blogger.

The Kharkiv city centre, with its blue and yellow recruitment

FIGHT TO THE FINISH
Sai (second from right), a student from Tamil Nadu who has joined a Ukrainian local militia

PAWAN KUMAR/AAJTAK

tents, was flattened by Russian artillery and missile strikes. "The strikes on Kharkiv are punitive. The city is being bombarded to break the morale of the Ukrainians so that we do not resist when the Russians attack Kyiv," says Tatanya Oleg, a school teacher in Kharkiv.

In Kyiv, a legion of the Georgian army is doing a training camp for civilians. With wooden rifles on their shoulders, residents, including teachers, gym instructors and bus drivers, are doing drills. They are being taught basic military tactics to assist the Ukrainian army.

Amongst the trainees is a young Indian student from Tamil Nadu, Sai, who is in Ukraine studying aerospace engineering. "I have been studying in Ukraine for the past 3 years. I have close friends here. This is my second home and it is under attack. When my Ukrainian classmates are fighting for their homes, how can I abandon them? So I decided to join them," says Sai.

Sai fears that he may be expelled from his college but says he has made up his mind to stand by his friends. And he isn't the only one. There are many foreign fighters, including mercenaries from Europe and the US, some of whom are veterans of the Afghanistan and Iraq operations. "I have operated in Afghanistan and have rich experience as a combat medic. I hope it will be of help to the Ukrainian forces," says William, who is training with the Georgian legion. Militia commanders say they are expecting mercenaries from Poland, US, Georgia, Australia and France to join the fight against Russia.

"The Ukraine army of 2022 is not the same that fought in the Donbas region in 2014. They have undergone extensive training with the NATO forces in the past eight years. Training, tactics and weapons are all NATO standard," says Kuldeep Kumar, an Indian businessman here who is married to an Ukrainian national. He says he will not leave despite the fears of a prolonged siege of Kyiv. "My wife is Ukrainian. My children are Ukrainian. They ask if India was being attacked, would I leave the country? Ukraine is their motherland. How can we leave?" he asks as the family shows us its stash of weapons including assault rifles.

> **"The strikes on Kharkiv are punitive. The city is being bombarded to break the morale of the Ukrainians"**
>
> **TATYANA OLEG**
> *School teacher, Kharkiv*

But not everybody wants to stay and fight. On the train from Mariopol to Kyiv, we meet Dasha, a young musician who was fleeing the intense shelling of Donetsk. "There is no point. This shelling, firing and war will not be over soon. I am a musician and music is not heard in the din of gunfire and shelling. I want to start afresh in Poland," she says.

The trains are full of people fleeing the war zone. Ukrainian men between 20 and 50 are not permitted to leave the country. They have been ordered to join the battle to protect the country. But given the vastly superior Russian forces, that's a task easier said than done. ■

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GLOBAL HIT A news report featuring Russian president Vladimir Putin plays on a screen on the facade of the Bombay Stock Exchange (BSE) building in Mumbai, on February 24

RAFIQ MAQBOOL/AP

ECONOMY

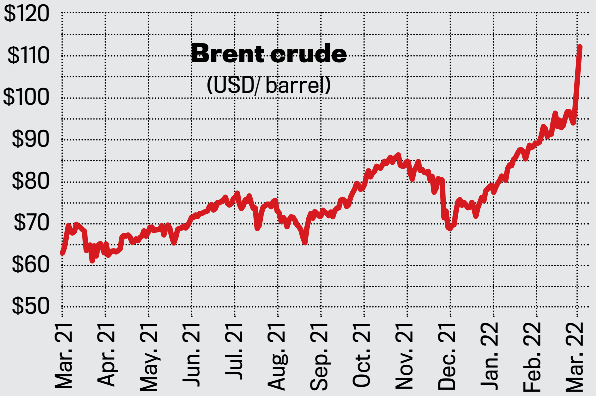
HOW INDIA WILL BE HIT

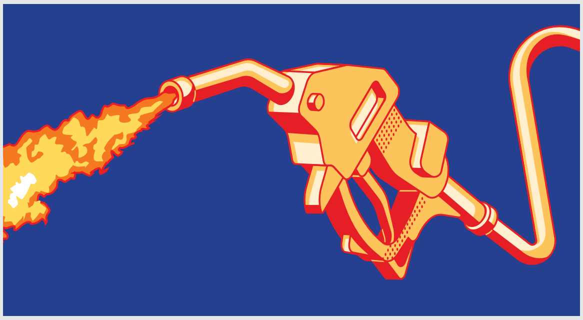
RUSSIA'S INVASION OF UKRAINE SENDS WORLD ECONOMIES INTO A TIZZY. THE INTENSITY OF THE IMPACT WILL DEPEND ON HOW PROTRACTED THE CRISIS IS

By **M.G. ARUN & SHWWETA PUNJ**

CRUDE AWAKENING

Prices touched $105/ barrel for the first time since 2014 as Russia launched its attack on Ukraine on Feb. 24. On Mar. 3, prices soared to $116/ barrel





THE OIL DEPENDENCY

Since India imports around 80 per cent of its crude oil needs, it is very vulnerable to price volatility

$94.3 billion

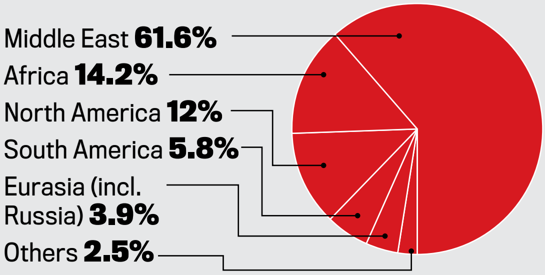
The value of India's crude oil imports from Apr. 2021 toJan. 2022 (175.9 million tonnes). Imports from Russia were worth $2 billion

$101.4 billion

The value of India's crude oil imports in 2019-20 (227 million tonnes)

SUPPLIER PIE

India's oil imports are mainly from the Middle East



(Source: GOI, Oillprice.com)

Graphics by TANMOY CHAKRABORTY

On February 28, after the first round of ceasefire talks between Ukraine and Russia failed, satellites revealed a 64 km-long convoy of Russian vehicles heading toward Ukraine's capital, Kyiv. News anchors described the scene as reminiscent of Europe during World War II, except that it was unfolding on millions of screens around the world in living colour. The death and devastation of WWII resulted in a new world order, as countries rebuilt their economies after the smoke cleared. A week into Russia's invasion of Ukraine, rumblings of a huge economic shake-up are being felt again, this time across a hugely interconnected globe with countries just limping out of yet another wave of the devastating pandemic. The economic consequences of Russia's invasion have been immediate, with crude oil now at its most expensive in eight years and global financial markets and trade reeling. The Indian economy, just barely back on its feet after a third bout with Covid, faces a difficult future.

Broadly, there are two aspects to the economic fallout of Russian aggression. The first is the direct repercussions, a major part of which stems from elevated oil prices. Russia is the world's third-largest producer and exporter of oil (after the US and Saudi Arabia), meeting 10 per cent of global demand. It is especially crucial in Europe, supplying 27 per cent of the oil and 40 per cent of the natural gas the region needs. In 2020, it exported some $66 billion (Rs 5 lakh crore) worth of fuels to the European Union (EU) alone, and it is a major player in OPEC+, which determines global oil prices. In the early days of the crisis, the price of Brent crude cleared $100 (Rs 7,580) per barrel, hitting $112.6 (Rs 8,535) on March 3. Some say it could touch $125 (Rs 9,475) if the crisis deepens.

That has an immediate effect on global trade, especially for net importing countries such as India, since pricier fuel raises costs across the board. Costly fuel also stokes inflation, which could force central banks to tighten interest rates, making loans—and economic activity—more expensive. Stock markets worldwide reacted to the invasion by crashing, wiping out billions in investor wealth. The damage does not end there. Russia is also a major supplier of industrial resources like iron and steel ($3.8 billion, or Rs 28,800 crore, to the EU in 2020), the world's largest wheat exporter and a major supplier of grains and vegetable oils. Trade interruptions will mean higher prices for all these goods, further stoking food inflation. Prices are already at their highest in more than a decade because of the impact of the pandemic on supply chains.

The second aspect is the indirect consequences of the sanctions western nations have hit Russia with. A particularly punitive step is the US, EU, UK and Canada's decision to cut many Russian banks off from the SWIFT (Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication) international payments system, choking Russian trade. (In the past, this step has been taken against both Iran and North Korea.) By curtailing Russian access to global banking, western nations also severely limited its ability to deploy its $540 billion (Rs 40.9 lakh crore) of forex reserves to protect the rouble from market volatility. The effect was immediate—on February 28, the rouble lost 30 per cent of its value against the dollar. Russia has also been prevented from raising sovereign debt from western financial markets, and the shares of Russian state-owned companies can no longer be listed on EU stock exchanges.

The US has also put the top 10 Russian financial institutions—comprising about 80 per cent of its banking sector—under more restrictions. Sherbank and its subsidiaries, which account for about 30 per cent of the Russian banking system, can no longer transact through the US financial network. Several Russian banks have also had their assets frozen, including VTB, Bank Rossiya and Promsvyazbank, and sanctions have been placed on a large swathe of Russia's senior leadership, including Putin and his top aides. The US, Europe and Canada have also closed their airspace to Russian flights, a move reciprocated by the Russians. Economists say the uncertainty and trade disruptions will result in a fall in global demand and a further decline in consumer confidence. The severity of the impact will depend on how long the conflict lasts, and if it spreads beyond Ukraine.

THE IMPACT ON INDIA

The consequences for India will depend, again, on how prolonged the conflict will be. With forex reserves of $680 billion (Rs 51.5 lakh crore), experts say the country will be able to weather short-term external shocks fairly well, but a prolonged war will take a severe toll. The impact will be felt on a number of fronts, from fuel prices and overall inflation to trade interruption, turmoil in equity markets and a hit to growth.

BILATERAL TRADE WITH RUSSIA

In Apr.-Dec. 2021-22, India's bilateral trade with Russia stood at $9.4 billion (Rs 71,250 crore), up from $8.1 billion (Rs 61,400 crore) in the previous fiscal

IMPORTS

- Fuels (nearly **$2 billion** worth of crude oil)
- Precious and semi-precious stones
- Mineral oils (about **$826 million**)
- Boilers
- Nuclear reactors
- Agricultural products (including **$268 million** worth of sunflower seed oil)
- Machinery and mechanical appliances
- Coal (around **$956 million** in various categories)
- Pearls
- Electrical machinery and equipment
- Fertilisers

EXPORTS

- Electrical machinery and equipment **$407 million**
- Pharmaceutical products **$386 million**
- Nuclear reactor parts **$226 million**
- Organic chemicals **$185 million**
- Vehicles **$158 million**
- Iron and steel **$108 million**
- Seafood **$103 million**

BILATERAL TRADE WITH UKRAINE

In Apr.-Dec. 2021-22, India's bilateral trade with Ukraine stood at $2.3 billion (Rs 17,430 crore), down from $2.5 billion (Rs 18,950 crore) in the previous fiscal

IMPORTS

- Agricultural products, including **$1.35 billion** worth of sunflower seed oil)
- Metallurgical products
- Plastics and polymers

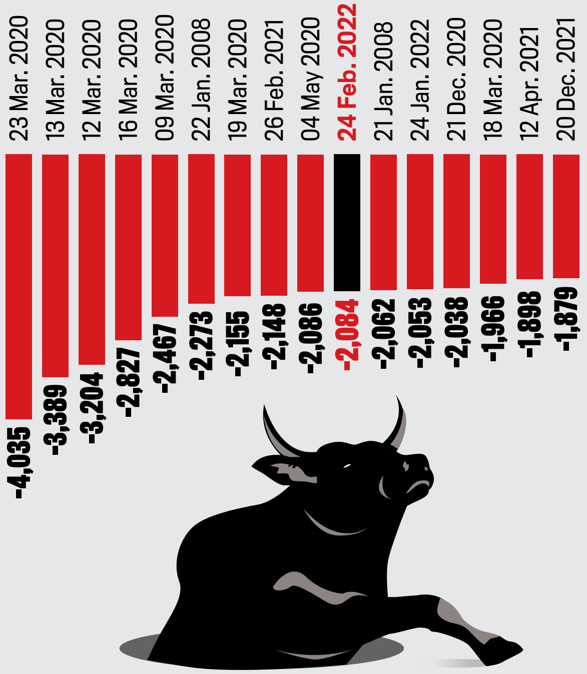
EXPORTS

- Pharmaceuticals **$110 million**
- Nuclear reactor parts **$22 million**
- Plastics **$21 million**
- Iron and steel **$20 million**
- Chemicals **$17 million**
- Rubber **$15 million**
- Electrical machinery **$14 million**

(Source: Department of Commerce, GOI)

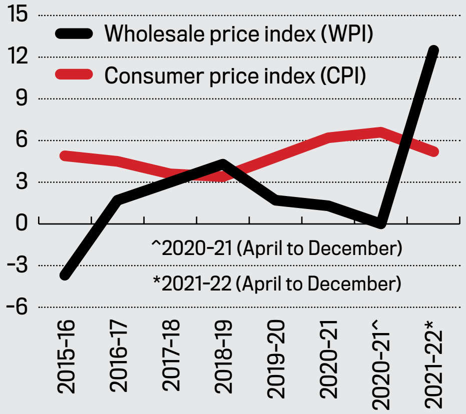
THE GREAT FALL

The 2,084 point crash on February 24 was the Sensex's 10th largest single-day fall



BURNING PRICES

While retail inflation (CPI) rose to 6 per cent in January, WPI has been over 10 per cent for 10 months in a row on higher food and fuel prices


15
12
9
6
3
0
-3
-6
Wholesale price index (WPI)
Consumer price index (CPI)
^2020-21 (April to December)
*2021-22 (April to December)
2015-16
2016-17
2017-18
2018-19
2019-20
2020-21
2020-21^
2021-22*

(Source: MoneyControl.com; Economic Survey)

Crude oil: Oil prices had already begun climbing this year as the Omicron threat receded and global economic activity ramped up, and have spiked alarmingly since the crisis. This is bad news for India, which imports 80 per cent of its needs. In the first 10 months of this fiscal year (Apr. 2021-Jan. 2022), India imported 175.9 million tonnes of crude worth $94.3 billion (Rs 7.1 lakh crore), including $2 billion (Rs 15,200 crore) worth from Russia. If domestic fuel prices seem stable, it is because of the ongoing assembly elections in five states. When these end, the Centre will have to decide whether to pass on the higher cost to consumers or continue to absorb the financial hit to curb inflation.

The crisis will also throw out of kilter the macroeconomic assumptions on which projections in Budget 2022 and the Economic Survey are based. For one, crude oil prices were expected to remain around $70-75 (Rs 5,300-5,700) a barrel. This will affect the survey's GDP growth projection of 8-8.5 per cent for FY23, higher than the Reserve Bank of India's (RBI's) forecast of 7.3 per cent but below the International Monetary Fund's 9 per cent. "The government's fiscal math is under pressure," says D.K. Joshi, the chief economist at Crisil. The elevated oil prices will also raise India's current account deficit (CAD, the difference between the value of total imports and exports). According to a 2019 RBI study, a $10 per barrel increase in crude prices leads to an additional deficit of $12.5 billion (Rs 94,750 crore). In the September quarter, India's CAD was $9.6 billion (Rs 72,800 crore), 1.3 per cent of GDP.

There is some hope, though. For one, since the Centre maintained high fuel excise duties while prices were low, it may have a buffer to fall back on. "It should use that money now, so that it doesn't pass the entire increase in oil price on to consumers," says Joshi. "My sense is some part will be borne by the government and the rest will be passed on." Secondly, as Indranil Sengupta, economist and head of research at capital market firm CLSA, explains, India's strong forex position means it is insulated in the short term. He says that even if oil were to touch $150 a barrel for two months (an outflow of $10 billion), and there is an outflow of $20 billion from FPIs, the RBI will be able to manage the impact. The RBI currently has over twice the $316 billion (Rs 24 lakh crore) of reserves it had in 2014. "India is in a very different position compared to earlier oil shocks in 1972, 1979 and 1990," he says, adding that oil at $150 for two months would push India's CAD to 2.3 per cent. "We can sustain 2-2.5 per cent," he says.

Inflation: High fuel prices inevitably drive inflation. This comes at a time when countries are already battling inflationary trends, a result of the trillions of dollars central banks pumped into their economies to tide over the pandemic. According to the RBI, a $10 per barrel increase in oil prices has about a 24 basis point direct impact and 26 basis point indirect impact on retail inflation (or consumer price inflation, CPI). In January, India's retail inflation was at a seven-month high—6.01 per cent—above the RBI's target inflation ceiling. High inflation in food prices, which jumped to a 14-month high of 5.43 per cent, was a key reason.

In its recent monetary policy review, the RBI surprised analysts by keeping key rates unchanged. Though this maintains the support for growth, the risk is uncontrolled inflation, impacting many economic actors, from consumers to manufacturers. ICICI Securities, a brokerage, estimates a two-fold economic impact of the Russian invasion: 'High crude oil prices will keep CPI inflation higher for longer, obliging the RBI to [go in for] more than the two [rate] hikes we expect in August-December 2022, unless the government sharply cuts excise duties on petrol and diesel to contain fuel inflation.' An interruption in the flow of grain from the Black Sea region could also stoke food inflation. “Inflation will definitely be higher [in the coming months],” says Ajit Ranade, vice chancellor of the Gokhale Institute of Politics and Economics. “Supply disruptions have not yet played themselves out. Our current account deficit will worsen, and the exchange rate will also be affected.”

The GDP hit: After the exuberance over the 8.5 per cent growth in the second quarter of FY22, GDP growth slowed to 5.4 per cent in October-December. The Centre expects India’s GDP to grow 8.9 per cent across the entire fiscal, down from the advance estimates of 9.2 per cent. Sectors such as construction, mining, manufacturing, agriculture, trade, hotels and transport have all seen a decline from last year. “If the war gets worse, there is a huge downside for the Indian economy,” says Nilesh Shah, MD of Kotak Mahindra Asset Management. “The second possibility is that it is a *blitzkrieg* (an intense but brief military campaign) and things normalise soon. In that scenario, the impact of oil prices on the fiscal deficit, the CAD and inflation will be minimal.”

Equity squeeze: On February 24, the day Russia announced its invasion, the BSE Sensex fell 1,874 points in intra-day trade, one of the biggest falls in recent years. Stock markets are expected to remain choppy over the next few weeks. ‘Higher inflation, the worsening geopolitical situation and a faster-than-expected monetary policy normalisation by major central banks have been the headwinds for the equity markets globally since the start of the year,’ says a research note from Credit Suisse. The other impact was on the rupee, the worst-performing among major Asian currencies last month. The spike in crude oil prices as a result of geopolitical tensions and the relentless selling by FPIs as central banks turned hawkish and began hiking interest rates have put pressure on the currency—on March 1, it was trading at Rs 75.70 to $1.

Trade crunch: Though Russia accounts for a small percentage of India’s overall trade—about 1.5 per cent of imports and 0.8 per cent of exports—the sectors that do connect with Russian firms will be impacted by the war and international sanctions. Interruptions in supply could also add inflationary pressure.

WITH RUSSIAN BANKS EXCLUDED FROM SWIFT, THOSE TRADING WITH RUSSIAN FIRMS HAVE ADDED WORRIES ABOUT OUTSTANDING BILLS

In April-December 2021-22, the total trade value between India and Russia was $9.4 billion (Rs 71,250 crore), up from $8.1 billion (Rs 61,400 crore) in 2020-21. Major imports included about $2 billion (Rs 15,160 crore) worth of crude oil and mineral oils, as well as coal and fertiliser (in 2020, India imported $610 million, or Rs 4,624 crore, worth of the latter). Since India imports nearly all its phosphatic fertiliser, this will have an impact—the Centre subsidises urea, phosphorous and potash-based fertilisers, and has budgeted Rs 1 lakh crore on this account for 2022-23. Exports included $407 million (Rs 3,085 crore) of electrical machinery and equipment, pharmaceutical products and nuclear reactor parts, among others. As much as 13 per cent of India’s tea exports also go to Russia. Now, with Russian banks excluded from SWIFT, those trading with Russian firms will have added worries about future payments and outstanding bills. Also impacted will be India’s trade with Ukraine—bilateral trade stood at $2.3 billion (Rs 17,430 crore) in April-December 2021-22, down from $2.5 billion (Rs 18,950 crore) in 2020-21. Major imports included $1.35 billion (Rs 10,230 crore) worth of sunflower oil, metallurgical products, plastics and polymers. (As much as 80 per cent of India’s sunflower oil comes from Ukraine.) Major exports included $110 million (Rs 834 crore) of pharmaceuticals, nuclear reactor parts, plastics and iron and steel, among other products.

It is said that there are no winners in war, only survivors. In an increasingly interconnected world, the tremors of war spread quickly, impacting millions of people across the globe. The damage already done could take years to heal. How much worse it gets depends on the crisis playing out on the north coast of the Black Sea. ■

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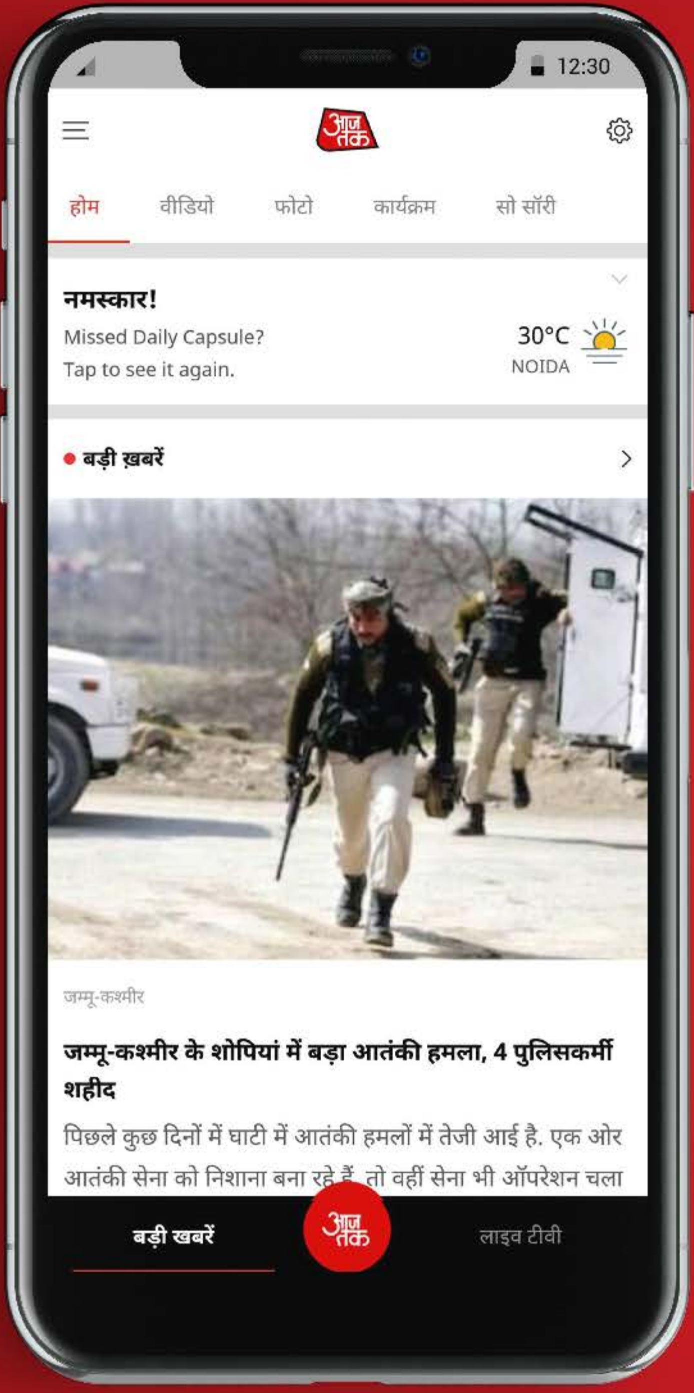

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जम्मू-कश्मीर

जम्मू-कश्मीर के शोपियां में बड़ा आतंकी हमला, 4 पुलिसकर्मी शहीद

पिछले कुछ दिनों में घाटी में आतंकी हमलों में तेजी आई है. एक ओर आतंकी सेना को निशाना बना रहे हैं, तो वहीं सेना भी ऑपरेशन चला

बड़ी खबरें लाइव टीवी

LUCKY ESCAPE
Indian students on a Budapest-Delhi flight after being evacuated, Feb. 27

ANI

COVER STORY/ 'OPERATION GANGA'

FASTEN YOUR SEATBELTS

The government's urgent steps to bring back Indian nationals are overtaken by tragedy

By **GEETA MOHAN**

Russia's assault on Ukraine has led to a significant logistical and diplomatic challenge for the Modi administration—the evacuation of Indian nationals, particularly students, from the war-torn country. Some 20,000 Indians were in the country at the start of the crisis, most of them studying medicine in different parts of Ukraine.

On January 25, the Indian embassy in Kyiv, in a Facebook post, asked Indian nationals to register themselves online by January 31. Its first advisory, on February 15, asked Indians whose stay "is not essential" to leave the country in view of the "uncertainties" of the situation in Ukraine. On February 16, the Indian government lifted the cap on passengers placed in the wake of Covid-19. On February 18, Air India announced three additional flights for the 22nd, 24th and 26th.

On February 20, in its second advisory, the mission suggested that students leave the country "temporarily". Two more advisories followed on February 22 regarding additional flights and addressing questions about online classes. Most of the students did not leave since the advisories were mildly worded. All hell broke loose on February 24, when Russia announced its military operation in Ukraine. There was chaos and many Indians moved to the western border of Ukraine to cross over to neighbouring countries. At this point, there was a fifth advisory, asking Indians to return to their respective cities in Ukraine until the embassy and the Indian government could arrange their evacuation. In all, some 10 advisories were issued by March 2, including a video message by the Indian envoy to Ukraine, ambassador Partha Satpathy.

OP GANGA IN NUMBERS

Of the roughly **20,000** Indian nationals in Ukraine before the conflict, **4,000** had left before the war started. As of March 1, the MEA says **8,000** Indians air-lifted by Operation Ganga; **31** evacuation flights from Ukraine's neighbouring countries planned between March 2 and 8

On February 26, the Modi government launched a massive evacuation programme to bring back the stranded Indians. As of March 1, officials say around 12,000 Indian nationals have left Ukraine. A 24x7 control centre has been set up to assist in the evacuation through the border crossing points with Hungary, Poland, Romania and the Slovak Republic. A dedicated Twitter handle, 'OpGanga Helpline', has also been created to disseminate information. The first batch of evacuees comprising 219 nationals returned to India on a February 26 flight from Bucharest to Mumbai. 'Welcome back. First step of #OperationGanga,' tweeted foreign minister Jaishankar. Four senior Union ministers have also been sent as special envoys to the countries bordering western Ukraine to oversee the evacuation.

Meanwhile, tragedy struck on the morning of March 1 with Indian student Naveen Shekharappa, 21, killed by Russian shelling in Kharkiv, a city bordering the Donbass region in eastern Ukraine. The final-year medical student from Karnataka had stepped out from his bunker to get essential supplies. His shattered father recalled receiving the bad news: "Around 10 yesterday (March 1), he called and told us how he had spent the night. He was getting ready so he said he would call after breakfast. But he did not call. The MEA then called at 2 pm and told us the news."

On March 1, foreign secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla summoned the ambassadors of Russia and Ukraine to discuss "safe passage" for Indian nationals. The evening of March 2 brought an ominous new advisory, telling the Indians stranded in Kharkiv to leave immediately 'under all circumstances'. ■

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TIE-BREAKER TERRITORY

Why **Purvanchal,** the Bhojpuri-speaking eastern belt of Uttar Pradesh, may well decide who will rule Lucknow

BY PRASHANT SRIVASTAVA IN AZAMGARH, KUSHINAGAR & GORAKHPUR

PTI

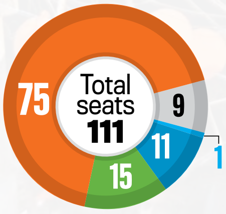
सोच ईमानदार, काम असरदार
यूपी फिर मांगे भाजपा सरकार
चुन्ने गोरखपुर
ANI

ON FAMILIAR GROUND
Yogi Adityanath's roadshow in Gorakhpur, Feb. 28

Think of it as an Uttar Pradesh within an Uttar Pradesh. The perfect microcosm. Except in the cardinal direction it marks out—the east, rather than the north—Purvanchal is for UP what UP is for India. It would report a high match on almost all other parameters. Especially in terms of that ironic equation: it's the poorer part, yet the one that holds the decisive casting vote over the whole. If a sovereign command over UP tilts the power balance in India, the victor in the Bhojpuri-speaking eastern belt may well get to hold that sceptre in Lucknow. The 19 districts that vote in the last two phases of an epic election hold approximately a total population of 35 million—enough to rival any East European nation on their own—but they are formed in an intricately patterned social mosaic. That creates its own dynamics, but there's a fluidity at the micro level too. And if the larger battle is still poised as a wide open game, one that can go any which way, it's reflected in how the individual voter reads the polls: there's an ambiguity, a sense of certitudes shaken by surrounding change.

Take the words of Nand Kumar, of Mundera Bazar in Gorakhpur. The 53-year-old has come to attend a Yogi Adityanath roadshow—it's Monday, February 28, and voting is just two days away in the chief minister's home base. If anything, it should have been all sewn up. Perhaps it is. "*Baba hi jitiye* (Yogi will win)," says Nand Kumar. But there's an iffiness in his tone, at least about the overall scenario in UP. Reason? His 24-year-old son, Awadesh, did not accompany him. Instead, he had chosen to attend Akhilesh Yadav's roadshow in the town area on Saturday. "We support Maharaj-*ji*," indicating himself and his wife, "but the new generation in my family is in favour of Akhilesh." He will not hazard a guess about the final tally. No one who witnessed the two roadshows wants to be in the game of predicting outcomes. Both events were fully packed. Purvanchal is proving to be quite the climax: experientially at least, it feels like a tense tie-breaker.

WHO STANDS WHERE



● BJP ● SP ● BSP ● Congress ● Others

Leaders to watch: Yogi Adityanath (BJP), Om Prakash Rajbhar (SBSP), Anupriya Patel (Apna Dal-S), Sanjay Nishad (Nishad Party), Swami Prasad Maurya (SP), Ajay Lallu (Cong.), Dara Singh Chauhan (SP), Abbas Ansari (SBSP)

Graphic by ASIT ROY

Both parties, the BJP and the Samajwadi Party (SP), claim the upper hand after the first five phases. Whichever one is right, the 111 seats of Purvanchal present such a complex challenge that prior advantage may be of no avail. The numerical game here is of a qualitatively different sort. Politics in UP's western and central provinces is marked by the dominance of specific castes and communities in a majority of seats. The electoral equations here, on the other hand, present a far more complicated picture. There is a whole archipelago of non-elite castes dominating pockets across this swathe—especially non-Yadav OBCs and non-Jatav Dalits. Just that former segment numbers nearly 8 million. How many of them the smaller caste-based outfits manage to attract, therefore, will be critical to the success of the bigger parties. The bigger parties have rushed to make alliances with parties that claim the affiliation of communities like the Rajbhars, Kurmis, Mauryas, Pasis, Nishads and Nonias. It's a marker of political evolution, in a way—of power being federated.

THE POWER BACKUP

The ruling BJP has the support of the Apna Dal (S) and Nishad Party. The former, led by Union minister and Mirzapur MP Anupriya Patel, has a strong hold among Kurmis, only 2.7 million-odd in all, but above 9 per cent of the electorate in these parts—which makes them the second largest chunk of OBCs after Yadavs, who too are nearly 5 million here. Anupriya's Apna Dal is contesting from 17 seats, but its proprietary hold over Kurmis is challenged by the Apna Dal (K) faction, led by her mother Krishna Patel, which is part of the Samajwadi Party alliance. The Nishad Party, which claims a command over the riverine fishing community in this Gangetic belt (comprising 22 subcastes), is contesting from 16 seats. The fragmented community map of eastern UP enables the Nishads to punch above their weight too—especially because they have 10-plus per cent population concentration in over half a dozen districts here, including Gorakhpur, Kushinagar and Varanasi.

The Samajwadi Party has on its side two small parties that are offering a crucial counter-balance. The Suheldev Bharatiya Samaj Party (SBSP) of O.P. Rajbhar is the main name here. The Rajbhars form only 4 per cent of the population in UP, but they too constitute 12-22 per cent of the electorate in several districts in Purvanchal, especially in Azamgarh, Jaunpur, Mau, Ballia, Ghazipur and Varanasi. That makes them a decisive element in over 25 seats. The Janvadi Party (Socialist) wields influence over the traditionally salt-making Nonia/ Lonia/ Lunia community—again, they are only 2 per cent of UP's total population, but form 10-15 per cent of the electorate in several eastern districts, including Chandauli, Mau, Ghazipur and Ballia.

The SP has also fielded heavyweight OBC leader Swami Prasad Maurya from Fazil Nagar seat of Kushinagar. A former minister in Yogi Adityanath's government and an influential Maurya community leader, his switch to the Akhilesh camp was touted as a self-fulfilling prophecy—both a signal and a catalyst

ENEMY LINES
An Akhilesh Yadav rally in Gorakhpur, Feb. 27

for the potential exodus of non-Yadav OBCs from the BJP's umbrella.

UMBRELLA OR RAINBOW?

The BJP, of course, plays that down, belittling the SP alliance as a non-cohesive agglomeration of caste-based parties locked in conflict with each other. The ultimate BJP project is to cement all the elements behind a universalising 'big party' logic. Anupriya Patel syncs with that sentiment. Her Apna Dal is not only drawing from Kurmi support, even other OBC/ MBC groups and Dalits come under their sway, she tells INDIA TODAY. "We have a hold among all castes. That's why we win."

Arun Rajbhar, son of O.P. Rajbhar and SBSP spokesperson, insists the opposite is true. Firstly, the Rajbhar votebank has an impact on all the seats in Purvanchal, he says. Moreover, in his opinion, the aggregation of castes is not just a numerical thing—there's a real synergy. He denies the BJP charge of disunity on the ground with the SP cadre. "We are getting more support from the SP than we expected. It is a natural alliance. In 2017, when we had an alliance with the BJP, they used to treat us differently because we are MBCs but SP leaders have given us full respect." Sanjay Chauhan, chief of Janvadi Party (Socialist), too, says: "The Samajwadi Party supported us in every way. Our alliance with them was sealed in the Lok Sabha when Akhilesh*ji* gave me a ticket from Chandauli, so we will always remain with them." He also cites the key role the Nonia Chauhans will play in over a dozen districts.

A WHOLE ARCHIPELAGO OF NON-ELITE CASTES, ESPECIALLY NON-YADAV OBCs AND NON-JATAV DALITS, DOMINATE POCKETS OF PURVANCHAL

The war of rhetoric goes all the way up to the top. Last Saturday, February 26, Akhilesh struck in the heart of enemy camp. After his massive rally and three-hour-long roadshow in Gorakhpur, he said: "The respect and love I got here is unmatchable. This shows BJP is going to lose here badly." On Monday, Yogi's riposte came: the BJP had already won, he said, and the last two phases were only going to take the tally above 300. The heavier artillery is on its way. Prime Minister Narendra Modi is likely to stay for three days on a trot in his Lok Sabha constituency, Varanasi, which votes in the seventh phase. In 2017, the BJP had won all the eight seats in Varanasi, and eight out of nine in Gorakhpur. The lone BSP MLA joined the SP earlier this year. And Akhilesh has also found a potential crack in the BJP's *savarna* base: against Yogi, he has fielded Shubhawati Shukla, widow of late BJP leader Upendra Dutt Shukla, seeking to cash in on the Thakur-vs-Brahmin narrative.

THE RATION CARD

One of the themes that has picked up of late is the free ration the state provides. Jaya Devi, a 54-year-old woman in Baghai village of Kushinagar, is ready to switch loyalties from the BSP to BJP for that. "*Jinka namak kha rahe hain, unko vote dene mein kya burai*" (what's wrong if our vote is loyal to those who give us bread)?" she says. The freebie itself produces contrary reactions on the ground. Munna Chauhan, a 32-year-old from the same village, asks, "How long can you live on free rations if there is no employment? We want jobs." His neighbour Ramesh Yadav praises the ration scheme but says he will go with "*apne log* (own people)"—that is, SP.

BJP functionaries also point to the 340-km-long Purvanchal Expressway, the Kashi Corridor and development work in the districts surrounding Varanasi to predict a landslide victory. SP leaders counter it by raising the question of jobs, inflation and stray cattle. Both sides, by their own reckoning, are splitting areas of total dominance between them—Varanasi, Mirzapur, Ballia and Chandauli for the BJP, and Mau, Azamgarh, Ambedkarnagar and Ghazipur for the SP. Prof. Kaviraj, political analyst, claims the SP's caste coalitions have made the BJP's path tougher, because the smaller castes come as add-ons over the SP's traditional Muslim-Yadav base. On the other side, Modi still plays out as an X-factor. Someone somewhere will have a casting vote in this tie-breaker too. Will it be someone who wants free ration or someone who believes power itself must be distributed? ■

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SPECIAL REPORT | COVID-19

OVER AT LAST?

THE MILDER OMICRON VARIANT RAISES HOPE THAT WE CAN PERHAPS TAME THE PANDEMIC. IT IS THE UNVACCINATED WHO MAY USHER IN A FRESH WAVE

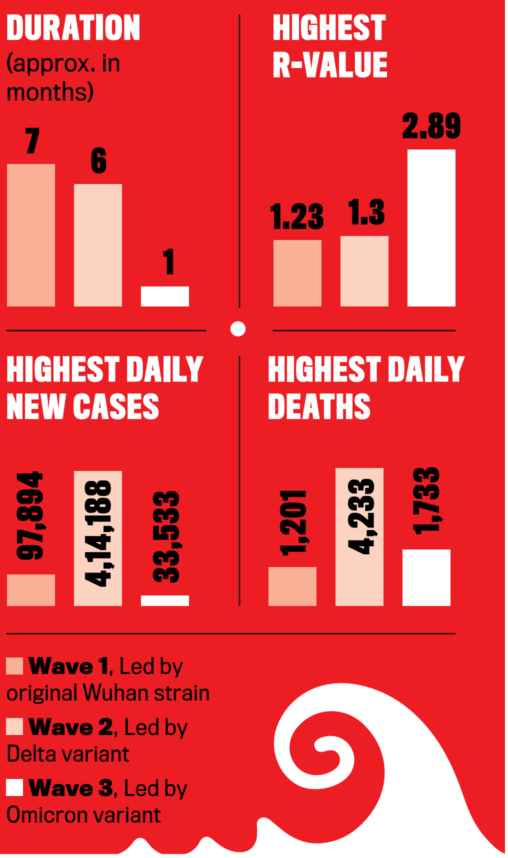
By Sonali Acharjee

RETURN TO NORMAL A bustling mall in Noida

CHANDRADEEP KUMAR

HOW THE COVID WAVES UNFOLDED

The virus may have spread faster this time, but the third wave proved to be shorter and less deadly despite the milder measures taken to deal with it



Graphics by TANMOY CHAKRABORTY

As India reported 10,273 new cases and a positivity rate of 1 per cent on February 27 compared to 347,254 cases and a positivity rate of 17.94 per cent on January 21, the question drifted up to the surface again: Are we finally seeing the last of the Covid-19 pandemic?

The deadly spread of the Delta variant last year taught the world not to hazard a definitive answer to that question too soon. But now the milder Omicron strain is lulling us into complacency. Dare we hope things are different this time?

For one, compared to the seven months the first wave took to subside, and the six months for the second to end, despite extensive lockdowns during both, the third wave has seen an ebb in a matter of weeks after its initial spike in infections. The average number of daily deaths too was half that. The severity of the disease Omicron caused was also comparatively mild, and nothing that the country's healthcare system could not handle.

Randeep Guleria, director, AIIMS, credits this to the country's vaccination programme. "If we are seeing a less severe third wave," he says, "vaccination has a huge role to play." Over

IN THE PILL BOX

New drugs and their efficacy in reducing the impact of the virus

BARICITINIB

Developed by: Eli Lilly and Incyte Corporation

Type: Janus kinase (JAK) inhibitors

Efficacy: Reduces risk of death by nearly 50 per cent

Status: WHO recommended, FDA approved, not yet approved in India for Covid (already used to treat arthritis and available in the market)

SOTROVIMAB

Developed by: GlaxoSmithKline

Type: Monoclonal antibodies

Efficacy: Risk of hospitalisation and death reduced by 85 per cent

Status: WHO recommended, FDA approved, waiting approval in India

MERCK PILL

Developed by: Ridgeback Biotherapeutics and Merck

Type: Antiviral

Efficacy: Reduces death and risk of hospitalisation by 30-50 per cent

Status: EUA in India but not recommended for use due to safety concerns

PAXLOVID

Developed by: Pfizer

Type: Antiviral

Efficacy: Reduces the risk of hospitalisation and death by 88 per cent when given to unvaccinated people at high risk of severe Covid within five days of the onset of symptoms

Status: FDA approved, applied for EUA in India

REGEN-COV

Developed by: Regeneron

Type: Monoclonal antibodies

Efficacy: Reduced the risk of symptomatic infection by 81 per cent in Delta, not effective against Omicron

Status: Lost FDA approval for use; approved and recommended in India

ENSOVIBEP

Developed by: Novartis

Type: Antiviral

Efficacy: In a study on 407 volunteers, researchers found that the drug cut the risk of hospitalisation by 78 per cent

Status: Applied for FDA EUA, not yet approved in India

BAMLANIVIMAB AND ETESEVIMAB

Developed by: Eli Lilly

Type: Monoclonal antibodies

Efficacy: Showed a 70 per cent reduction in hospitalisations and deaths; not as effective against Omicron

Status: Approved and recommended in India

75 per cent of adult Indians are now fully vaccinated against Covid, and many experts believe this previously acquired immunity explains the milder run of the Omicron wave. And moving forward, it is the world's unvaccinated people, WHO director general Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus warned on January 6, who could host a new variant of the virus. There is no foretelling the severity of the disease it could cause. It could be weak like Omicron, infecting only the upper respiratory tract, or severe and unpredictable like Delta, which resulted in acute lung infection. So, while acknowledging that the present surge has settled, Dr V.K. Paul, member, NITI Aayog, warns that we cannot lower our guard. "We have to be ready for any future variants or surges, and continue to be Covid vigilant," he says.

What Covid has also taught us is that there is no such thing as being too careful, as Hong Kong is now discovering. The city of 7.5 million observed the world's most stringent lockdowns, registering only 26,000 cases and some 200 deaths since the start of the pandemic. Pune, also a city of around 7.1 million, has had nearly 1.2 million cases and 20,000 deaths in that time. However, the moment Hong Kong eased its Covid curbs, Omicron spread like wildfire despite 70 per cent of its population being vaccinated. The city recorded its highest ever number of daily cases—4,285—on February 23, and experts predict the figure could soon touch 28,000. Its hospital system is overwhelmed, with a waiting list of around 10,000. The surge is being attributed to the city having very little previous experience in handling Covid patients, especially in such numbers. Hong Kong residents have also had far less exposure to the virus compared to other cities in the world where lockdowns were lifted a year and a half ago.

Living with Covid, thus, will require more than lockdowns. Strain surveillance, strong clinical treatment and rapid vaccination will have to continue being part of any long-term game plan to beat the virus.

A HEALTHY SIGN Empty beds at the Covid care centre in the Commonwealth Games Village in Delhi

KAMAL SINGH/PTI

THREAT OF A NEW STRAIN

“Covid will not go away after Omicron. More variants will come up,” asserts Dr Rajeev Jayadevan, an epidemiologist and former head of the IMA (Indian Medical Association). Researchers have even fixed a date for the new wave’s arrival—June 22—as well as the length of its stay—till October 24. This is what IIT Kanpur researchers predicted and published on the preprint server MedRxiv on February 24, using a statistical model. Its severity, though, will depend on the emergence of new variants.

With the virus exhibiting 10 major variants already, a new variant of concern is likely to come up in either of two ways—as an altogether fresh strain, or as a sub-strain of an existing variant. In fact, a sub-strain of the original BA.1 variant, which accounted for more than 98 per cent of Omicron cases, is already doing the rounds. Christened BA.2, it has quickly become the dominant strain in Denmark. Even though it is believed to be more infectious, it is not expected to trigger another wave because, as Dr Jayadevan points out, “those who have had BA.1 will be immune to it or have a very mild disease”. However, over time, the antibody count of those who have been infected with Omicron could go down, leaving them vulnerable to another Covid attack. And while it may not prove deadly, it could be like getting Omicron all over again. BA.2 may not be of concern today but could well become a variant of concern in a few months, particularly since lab studies in Denmark, which have analysed data from 8,500 Danish households, indicated it to be 33 per cent more infectious than BA.1. The sub-variant is also unresponsive to treatments like monoclonal antibodies and exhibits immune escape properties.

THE NEXT VARIANT COULD BE WEAK LIKE OMICRON, AFFECTING ONLY THE UPPER RESPIRATORY TRACT, OR STRONG LIKE DELTA, INFECTING THE LUNG

“RNA viruses never stop mutating; it is how they survive,” says Dr Rakesh Mishra, director of the Tata Institute for Genetics and Society in Bengaluru. The mutation itself is not the threat, it is how it manifests clinically that causes concern. “In its Omicron avatar, the virus was milder but more infectious,” says Mishra. “It is trying to find ways to keep infecting humans, particularly since most of us are now vaccinated against it. Omicron’s sub-variant is more infectious than the original. The next mutation could be even more infectious, have greater immune escape, or lead to more serious disease. It is uncertain which way Covid will mutate to survive.”

What is certain though is that vaccines will remain our best armour against infections, serious disease and the emergence of new variants. “We will eventually need boosters for everyone in India,” says Dr Rahul Pandit, member of the Maharashtra Covid task force. “Omicron has shown that the virus is finding ways to escape the immune defences of human beings. So, we must boost those defences from time to time.”

NEW PILLS ON THE BLOCK

Brijesh Kumar, a 39-year-old businessman in Delhi, contracted Covid in both the second and the third wave. Both times his infection was mild. However, there was a huge difference in the number of drugs he had to take each time, he says. “The first time I had eight different medicines to take, including four multivitamins. There was sheer confusion about what medicine was needed. Different doctors would advise different drugs,” he says. “But with Omicron, it was simple–only paracetamol, vitamin C and zinc supplements and lots of fluid intake.” While medication alone may not end the pandemic, it will remain vital in its management. India’s treatment protocol has strengthened with every wave. “Our treatment of Covid has advanced significantly over the past two years,” says Dr Sandeep Budhiraja, medical director of the Max healthcare group. “If the Covid surge was mild this year, it is also because of growing awareness and medical options. Future waves too will

DOCTORS FOR YOU

A DOSE OF PROTECTION
Jabuben Bharwad, 30, being vaccinated in Mahijada village, Ahmedabad

AMIT DAVE/REUTERS

depend not just on the variant but on its clinical treatment." The streamlining of Covid treatment helped prevent the disease from aggravating in many patients. "During the second wave, many patients would take steroids too early, or promising Covid drugs too late. Now, the timing of drugs has become universally known and has also helped keep the disease mild," says Dr Pandit.

Globally, there are new drugs now that have a greater chance of taming the virus (see *In the Pill Box*). Pfizer's antiviral drug Paxlovid, for example, cuts the risk of death and hospitalisation by almost 88 per cent. GSK and Vir Biotechnology's monoclonal antibody drug Sotrovimab reduces the same by 85 per cent and comes with a WHO recommendation. Both these are yet to be approved and made available in India. Experts say it is important India upgrade its clinical treatment guidelines to include global advances in Covid drugs. For example, the Merck pill by Ridgeback Biotherapeutics and Merck, approved by the FDA (US Food and Drug Administration) and in use in the UK, has been cleared in India but is not part of the Covid treatment guidelines due to safety concerns. Other treatments in the guidelines, such as Remdesivir and antibody cocktails, remain expensive. "If we have another surge such as the one in Delta, then affordable treatments and more efficacious drugs will really help reduce the load on hospitals," says Dr Farah Ingale, an internal medicine specialist with Fortis Hiranandani in Mumbai.

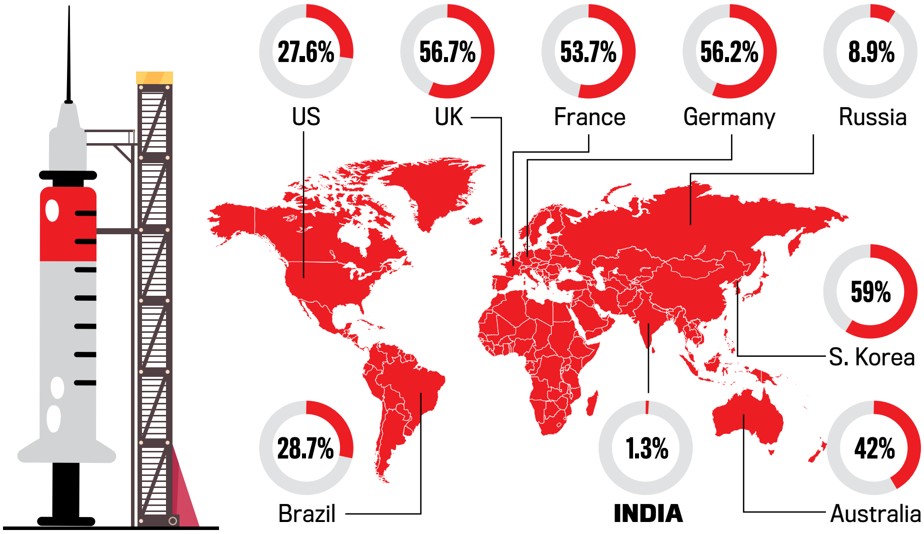
DESPITE 10 APPROVED VACCINES, JUST 3—COVISHIELD, COVAXIN AND SPUTNIK V—ARE IN INDIA'S ADULT VACCINATION PROGRAMME

PANDEMIC OF THE UNVACCINATED

On February 10, the WHO stated that the acute phase of the pandemic could end this year itself if 70 per cent of the world gets vaccinated. Currently, only 79 countries have given at least one dose to 75 per cent of their population. "We are connected in this pandemic," says Dr Budhiraja. "A strain in any other country will quickly reach India. So, it is not about vaccinating one country in isolation." In early 2021, Israel's vaccination programme showed that vaccines could reduce the number of new infections. Even when new strains emerged that could escape vaccine-acquired immunity, it was the unvaccinated who suffered the most. In the European Union, the Covid survival ratio this winter was 11 times higher than last winter when vaccinations had just begun. In the US, there were nearly four times as many positive cases for each death this year compared to last winter's peak, according to Bloomberg's Vaccine Tracker.

THE BOOSTER ROSTER

In the Omicron wave, vaccination with a booster reduced chances of hospitalisation and death by over 90 per cent. Most countries now are racing to give their people a third dose. Given below is the percentage of people who have got the booster. India still has a long way to go



"Living with the virus does not mean there won't be seasonal surges," says public health expert Dr Gagandeep Kang. "To prevent deaths and severe disease during these waves, vaccinations and surveillance of new strains are crucial." The unvaccinated also allow the virus to mutate further, running the risk of breeding a strain that trumps currently available vaccines.

India has vaccinated a majority of its adult population. According to government figures, more than 76 million children between the ages of 15 and 17 have also been inoculated. The next key challenge is booster shots for all. Vaccination with a booster dose reduced hospitalisation and death by more than 90 per cent, according to NHS during the Omicron wave in the UK. "Antibody counts start to reduce after a certain amount of time," says infectious disease expert Dr Ankita Baidya. "Some studies have shown that despite low antibodies, immune cell memory has helped keep the symptoms mild even if it hasn't prevented infection. A booster will help improve Covid immunity certainly against variants with advanced immune escape mutations."

The good news is that India has a lot more approved vaccines this year compared to 2021 when public vaccinations had begun. In December 2021, India approved Serum Institute of India's Covovax. It was followed by approval for the ZyCoV-D vaccine—the world's first DNA vaccine against Covid. Cipla has been authorised to import the Moderna vaccine even as Johnson & Johnson's single-dose vaccine and Sputnik Light, a component of the Russian-made Sputnik V vaccine, have been approved. "The country's vaccination programme has come a long way," says Dr Guleria. "We have many more options for acquisition today than we did a year ago and have gained invaluable experience in logistical and administrative preparations for large-scale inoculations."

Among the vaccines to get emergency use approval in India is Corbevax, a protein subunit vaccine developed by the Hyderabad-based pharma firm Biological E. India's third homegrown vaccine, it has been approved for use in those between 12 and 18 years of age. "Protein subunit vaccines are safe and have less side-effects than other kinds of vaccines," says Dr N.K. Arora, chairman of the National Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation (NTAGI)'s Covid-19 working group. "These vaccines also have higher antibody levels and are easy to store." The government has placed an order with Biological E for 50 million doses of Corbevax, each costing Rs 145. Another order for 300 million doses had been placed in August 2021. Two more promising vaccines are in the pipeline—HGCO19, India's first mRNA vaccine made by the Pune-based Genova in collaboration with the Seattle-based HDT Biotech Corporation; and a nasal vaccine by Bharat Biotech.

"To administer boosters to over 900 million adults, we need a ready supply but also more options for vaccines, particularly those showing higher efficacy," says Dr Kang. Despite 10 approved vaccines, only Covishield, Covaxin and Sputnik V are available currently in the national vaccination programme for adults, with Covishield accounting for around 85 per cent of the doses.

According to sources in the Union ministry for health and family welfare, the decision to open up booster doses for all adults is still pending. With over 15 countries having started booster doses, and some like Germany and the UK having given it to over 50 per cent of their people already, the case for booster shots grows stronger by the day. The faster India follows suit, the greater the chances of the next wave also being mild.

While Covid itself is here to stay, Omicron's short duration and mild temperament inspires hope that the pandemic could end this year. How soon it will happen will depend on the global vaccines administered. Ending the pandemic is no longer in the hands of one country but of the entire world. ■

THE NATION | PM e-VIDYA

PALTU SHYAMAL/ALAMY

ADDING AN e TO EDUCATION

RESPONDING TO THE URGENT NEED TO IMPROVE ACCESS TO EDUCATION, THE GOVERNMENT **STRENGTHENS ITS E-LEARNING INITIATIVES** TO ENSURE A BROADER REACH

By Kaushik Deka

If there was any good that came of the global pandemic, the digital turn towards online education would certainly be a contender. And even as the pandemic recedes, the virtue that the necessity bred now seems all set to stay. Even as students across the country return to brick and mortar schools, the classroom's virtual avatar is not likely to vanish into the ether. Hence the serious consideration of the hybrid model, which offers the best of both the worlds—the socio-emotional bonding of a physical classroom, and broader access to education through the online medium.

Cognisant of the need for access, equity and quality, the government launched its PM e-Vidya programme in 2020 to take the classroom to the student if they couldn't come to the classroom. With schools reopening now, rather than suspending the initiative, the Union finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman, in her budget speech on February 1, announced that the government will expand its 'One Class, One TV programme' from 12 to 200 channels to "impart supplementary teaching and build a resilient mechanism for education delivery". It was the first official acknowledgement of the fact that the country's children had lost almost two years of formal education, particularly in government schools and rural areas, and needed to be compensated for that loss.

"High quality e-content in all spoken languages will be developed for delivery via internet, mobile phones, TV and through radio and digital teachers," the finance minister announced. "A competitive mechanism for development of quality e-content by the teachers will be set up to empower and equip them with digital tools of teaching and facilitate better learning outcomes." Simultaneously, Sitharaman announced the setting up of virtual labs and skilling e-labs to encourage critical thinking and stimulate the learning environment. To address the issue of seat shortages, a digital university with world-class universal education has been mooted.

Launched as part of the government's Aatmanirbhar Bharat programme in May 2020, PM e-Vidya sought to unify all efforts in digital/

DECODING PM e-VIDYA

PM E-VIDYA It was launched in 2020 to unify all efforts related to digital and on-air education to enable multi-mode access to education. The initiative includes the following components:

DIKSHA Or the Digital Infrastructure for Knowledge Sharing was a portal launched in 2017 for teachers and students. Accessible after scanning the QR code provided in NCERT books, it allows one to study any subject of their choice in 18 languages.

NISHTHA Or the National Initiative for School Heads' and Teachers' Holistic Advancement is a training programme for teachers hosted on the DIKSHA platform. Available in 11 languages.

SWAYAM The Study Webs of Active Learning for Young Aspiring Minds is an online platform that facilitates hosting of all courses taught in classrooms from Class 9 till post-graduation. Accessible by anyone, anywhere, any time. Courses are interactive and free of cost. More than 10 million enrolments till January 2021.

SWAYAM PRABHA TV A group of 34 DTH channels that telecast curriculum-based course content 24 x 7 for Class 9 up to post-graduate level. It also beams content to prepare Class 11 and 12 students for competitive examinations. There are modules for teacher training too. From the 12 channels dedicated for Class 1 to Class 12, the number will now go up to 200. Available on DD Free Dish, TATA Play, DISH TV, Airtel and Jio TV mobile app.

MUKTA VIDYA VANI A web radio for students under the National Institute of Open Schooling.

SHIKSHA VANI A podcast that uses radio/ community radio to provide content on various subjects for Classes 9 to 12.

DOORDARSHAN, ALL INDIA RADIO They beam virtual classes and educational content across the country on TV, radio and YouTube.

SPECIAL E-CONTENT Meant for visually and hearing impaired students, they have been put up on DIKSHA and NIOS website/ YouTube.

IIT PROFESSOR ASSISTED LEARNING (IITPAL) AND E-ABHYAS These provide online coaching to students preparing for the Joint Entrance Examination.

online/ on-air education to allow what is called "coherent multi-mode access" to education. Comprising several components (see *Decoding PM e-Vidya*) such as Diksha, Nishtha, Swayam, Swayam Prabha TV, Mukta Vidya Vani, Shiksha Vani, IITPAL and E-Abhyas, the programme intends to cover the entire gamut of school education, disseminated through diverse media.

Apart from the online portals, an important component of the PM e-Vidya programme is the 12 DTH channels under Swayam Prabha TV, which are meant to support and reach students who don't have access to the internet. Classified as a "one class-one TV channel" initiative, it provides curriculum-based course content for students studying under the CBSE curriculum and the National Institute of Open Schooling. It is telecast in partnership with DD Free Dish, TATA Play, DISH TV, Airtel and Jio TV mobile App on a 24 x 7 basis. Till mid-February, 1,502 live interactive sessions of 30 minutes each have been telecast for Classes 1 to 10, covering about 751 hours. For Classes 11 and 12, 149 live interactive sessions of 60 minutes each have been telecast in the same period, covering 149 hours overall.

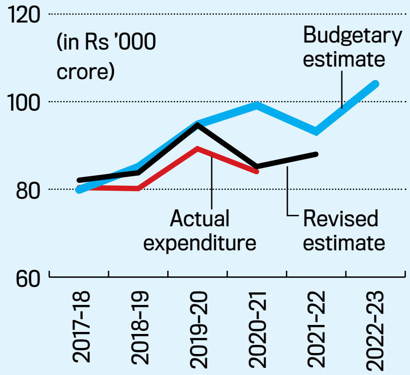
Several educationists have hailed the government's announcement to increase the channels from 12 to 200. Sonali Jain, co-chair of the Education Committee in PHDCCI, believes that these provisions of supplementary education, emphasis on critical thinking and methodical approach will prepare students for a seamless transition from learning to practical experience. Others say the new channels will bridge India's digital divide and improve overall learning outcomes for students. "A stable internet is a persistent impediment that students from rural areas face," says Silpi Sahoo, chairperson, SAI International Education Group, Odisha. "This is where the expansion of channels will come to the rescue as most rural sections will now have access to basic study material class-wise through a DTH service on their TVs and that too in their regional languages for better understanding." A 2021 national sample survey published last year by ICRIER and LIRNEAsia, a think-tank focused on digital policy, alerted us to the fact that only 20 per cent of school-age children in India had access to remote education opportunities during the pandemic, of whom only half participated in live online classes. A study by the Azim Premji Foundation in 2020 reached a similar conclusion when it discovered that almost 60 per cent of the school children in India could not access online learning opportunities. Another study by Oxfam found that even among students in urban private schools, half the parents reported issues with internet signal and speed. A third struggled with the cost of mobile data.

Government data too corroborated the poor state of virtual education in government schools. Under the Information and Communications Technology (ICT) component of the centrally-sponsored Samagra Shiksha scheme, states are given funds for ICT Labs and digital classrooms. As per UDISE (Unified District Information System for Education) data for 2019-20, only 119,581 schools in India had internet facility and there were 65,356 ICT Labs and 29,178 digital classrooms across all government schools. The central government approved the construction of 14,868 ICT labs and 58,534 classrooms the next year. Yet, the total number of labs and digital classrooms is not even 10 per cent of the number of government schools in India—1,116,932.

Not all experts, though, are convinced about these channels compensating

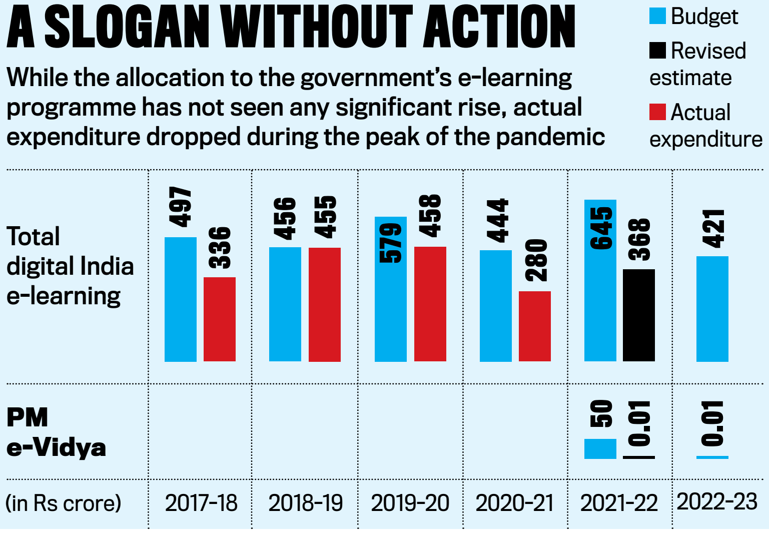
WHERE IS THE MONEY FOR EDUCATION?

Despite a 31 per cent hike in budgetary allocation to education in the preceding five years, actual expenditure has not increased much



A SLOGAN WITHOUT ACTION

While the allocation to the government's e-learning programme has not seen any significant rise, actual expenditure dropped during the peak of the pandemic



for the "learning loss" on account of closure of physical classrooms. 'With the huge digital divide and resource- and gadget-deficient families in India, we need more schools and higher education institutes on the ground than in the cyber-space,' read a statement by the Academics for Action and Development (AAD), a group of Delhi University teachers. Epidemiologist and public policy specialist Chandrakant Lahariya believes "setting up TV channels cannot undo the adverse impact of the past two years". Others claim that the government may have ensured delivery of content through these TV channels but it cannot stand in for a teacher to "actually teach" and respond to real-time queries even if education ministry officials maintain that experts conduct live interactive sessions on Skype on these channels.

The government's budgetary priorities do not inspire much hope either. Not only has budgetary allocation for PM e-Vidya been meagre since its inception, it has also seen a massive drop this year—from Rs 50 crore in 2021-22 to just Rs 0.1 crore this year. In fact, the budgetary allocation for the entire digital e-learning programme has gone down Rs 645.61 crore in the yesteryear to Rs 421 crore this year. There is no specific allocation for the digital university in the budget. Professor Tarun Jain of Indian Institute of Management Ahmedabad has termed the investment "minuscule" against the tremendous learning loss. Sumeet Mehta, co-founder and CEO of LEAD School, also feels budgetary allocation should not promote virtual learning over physical schooling.

Not just online learning, budgetary support has lagged behind the reformist intent of the New Education Policy in 2020. On paper, there has been a 31 per cent hike in allocation to education in the past five years. But the actual expenditure has not increased much (see *Where is the Money for Education?*). In fact, budgetary allocation saw a drop in the very next year of the NEP's launch—from Rs 99,311.52 crore to Rs 93,224.31 crore. This year, the government has allocated Rs 1.04 lakh crore to education.

Top education ministry officials, speaking on condition of anonymity, admit that the government was aware of the need to hike the budgetary allocation, but blame the current low allocation to poor utilisation of funds by states. Education is a state subject and state governments implement the centrally-funded schemes. "Funds are allocated in the budget by considering past utilisation of funds," says an education ministry official. "Several states failed to utilise the funds sanctioned to them."

Amid a growing clamour for raising the allocation for education to 6 per cent of GDP from the current 2 per cent, the actual expenditure has been lower than the budgetary allocation since 2018-19. Several states have not even utilised the sanctioned funds. Depending on a state's requirement, the education ministry provides Rs 6.4 lakh for setting up an ICT lab and Rs 2.4 lakh for digital classroom. In 2021-22, of the Rs 956.8 crore sanctioned for digital classrooms, the states spent only Rs 9.8 crore. Barring Nagaland, Rajasthan and Sikkim, no state spent a single penny on digital classrooms. In their defence, the state governments claim that with schools shut during the pandemic, expenditure on digital or physical infrastructure came to a halt.

The blame game apart, both the central and state governments need to concentrate their energies on building a holistic model to help students learn and experience what they have missed in the two years sacrificed to the pandemic. As author and educationist Meeta Sengupta says, PM e-Vidya could be an education safety net offering a multilingual and multilocation supplementary learning system, but its success will depend on its inclusion and expanse. For that to happen, the Centre and the states must collaborate with not just enough funds but a plan for execution too. ■

—with **Shelly Anand**

Womenpreneur in Education

An IMPACT Presentation

International **Women's Day** is being celebrated every year on **8th March** to acknowledge the immense contribution of all the **Women** towards the Socio-Economic, Cultural and Political Development of the Society & the Country. It is also an occasion to remind people about the gender equality and Legitimate rights of the **Women**.

WOMEN'S

EDUCATION IN INDIA:

THROUGH HISTORICAL LENSES

Education is considered a basic requirement and a fundamental right for the citizens of any nation. The education of women plays a vital role in the overall development of society. Education inculcates the skills, information, and self-confidence that one needs to be a better parent, worker, and citizen. The right to education has been recognized as an integral and essential part of every person irrespective of gender. Historically, education for men was promoted in all cultures, while women's education was not considered vital. Although in the Vedic period, women had access to education in India, they had gradually lost this right. Women in India were deprived of educational privileges for centuries, but there were always some exceptions to this general condition. Indian literature of all ages refers to educated women who took a prominent part even in public affairs and showed the finest skill in fine arts as well as in military art. Buddhism had an effect on the education of women. South Indian Dravidian society appears to have respected accomplished women during the Tamil Sangam era. Sangam poetry was composed by some 470 poets, including 154 women sages like Auvaiyar. In the British period, there was a revival of interest in women's education in India. During this period, various socio-religious movements led by eminent persons like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar emphasized women's education in India. Begum Rokeya Sultana, Pandita Ramabai, Savitribai Phule, Tarabai Shinde, Fatima Sheikh, Swarna Kumari Devi, and Anne Besant are a few among many trailblazers in providing education for girls and ostracized portions of society.

The first woman who spearheaded this change in society was Savitribai Phule. Her husband, Jyotirao Phule believed that education was the one tool that if provided to all humans, would get rid of all social inequalities. Despite fierce resistance from society and his family, he taught his wife and made her the first women teacher of India. They started a school for girls in 1848 in Pune, the first such school for Indians. Her role in opening up educational opportunities for women, despite stiff opposition from upper castes and reactionary forces, stands out as a classic example of courage and conviction. Savitribai is truly a role model. She was the first Indian to spark a revolution in Indian education by opening it up for girls and children of lower castes. For Savitribai, education was not merely alphabetical learning, but rather, an evolution of the mind itself. For Jyotiba and Savitribai, education was a means to bring about a radical change in society. It was a means for the transformation of society altogether. She worked along with her husband to discourage female infanticide and established a home, named "Balhatya Pratibandhak Griha", for the protection of widows. She also fought against the practice of child marriage, which had threatened the lives of women.

Pandita Ramabai was exceptionally learned, one of the early pioneers and a champion of women's rights. Her upbringing made her play the role of a women activist in her later life. She established Arya Mahila Samaj to uplift the poor condition of women in 1881 at Pune. She established a Mukti Mission for the young widows in 1889. By 1900 this mission gained popularity and hosted around two thousand children and women attending the school. She also came up with the establishment of Sharda Sadan. The aim of this Sadan was to impart education, shelter, medical facilities, and vocational, training to visually challenged, widows and orphans. Ramabai is considered a national icon of the women's development movement in India. In 1919, the king of England granted her the Kaiser-e-Hind award for her efforts to educate women, especially widows.

A close associate of Savitribai Phule was Tarabai Shinde, who shared views of gender and caste oppression and led the fight for women's rights. Her first published work 'Stri Purush Tulana' in Marathi, in which she explores the disparities between men and women, is regarded as one of India's first modern feminist texts.

Another pioneer in promoting education was Begum Rokeya Sultana, who was one of the first Muslim women within the field of Education in undivided Bengal during Colonial rule. She, with the help of her brother and her husband, pursued her education in Bangla and English. Rokeya started with her writings which were published in due course of time. After the death of her husband shortly, she poured aggressive efforts and devoted her life to the upliftment of Muslim women of Bengal. She realized the need for the education of women and thus, established a school for girls. Rokeya framed an inclusive curriculum at her school, where traditional and modern, religious as well as science courses were taught side by side. English was a compulsory subject at school along with subjects like Quran, English, Urdu, Maths, Science, Geography, History, Persian, Home science, Vocational Training, etc.

The elder sister of the poet Rabindranath Tagore, Swarna Kumari Devi, was one of the first prominent women writers in Bengali Literature. Her writing spoke about Indian women. She was an active supporter of women's rights and she had also founded an organization called 'Sakhi Samiti' for women to provide education and shelter. Her fiction reflected her progressive ideas rejecting traditional Indian patriarchy and advocating for women's education and their financial independence.

In the post-1910s, Irish educationist and social worker Anne Besant had an immense contribution to the upliftment of the status of women and providing them with educational opportunities. She was the founder of the Theosophical Society in India and along with Madan Mohan Malaviya, she founded the Benares Hindu University in 1916.

History has taught us that equal and active participation of women is obligatory. Unless women are educated, they will not be able to understand their rights and their importance. Empowerment of women aims at striving towards acquiring higher literacy level and education, better health care for women. What should never be forgotten is that women like men need to be proactive in the process of lifelong learning. That is true empowerment.

Sri Chaitanya's Sushma Boppana: 'Women have an amazing skill set'

"Education has been an eternal table conversation for us," said Sushma Boppana, Co-Founder and Academic Director of Sri Chaitanya Group of Institutions. Having worked with several MNCs in the US, it was but natural to come back to home where the heart lies. Sushma's parents, who are doctors, founded this institution in 1986. "Academics and education have inadvertently been ingrained in me right since childhood," she explained.

After graduating from BITS Pilani in the field of Computer Science, Sushma pursued her Masters in Information System in the US. "But I haven't enjoyed the facets of working on computer programming as much as I've enjoyed steering academics here," she said.

Sushma was brought up in a family where 'Beti bachao, beti padao' was the running mantra. Her father Dr BS Rao always stressed on the need for "an educated woman in the house". "The family stays healthy and prosperous when the women of the family are educated. This is what my father used to say," said Sushma, adding that Dr Rao always encouraged his wife Dr Jhansi Lakshmi Bai while attending meetings or delivering speeches. "Being a doctor and following a profession is different, but going out and meeting people to shape your organisation's future is a different ball game altogether," expressed Sushma.

Dr Rao motivated the women of the house so much that Sushma termed him the "most liberal man known". "When I came back to India, he never once pulled me back. He wanted me to venture out, create my own experiences and make my own decisions," said Sushma.

Running a school or any business requires good leadership skills. However, can being a woman leader be different? "Everywhere in India, every industry is male-dominated in a certain way. When I moved back to India, you won't believe how many meetings I've had where I've been the lone woman," she said, reminiscing the past. "It was a difficult task because I am not a teacher. I had to interact with so many teachers and I was a young parent with a one-year-old son. So, talking to parents and faculty wasn't easy," she narrated.

Sushma's mother was a huge inspiration during this time. "My mother had spent her time and effort there managing the classrooms, internal discipline and more. I grew up watching her for several years," said Sushma, who owes it to her mother for learning to manage people, while introducing new methodologies to help next-gen students do better.

According to the 2011 Census of India, 2% of boys are literate and only 65% of girls can read and write. How does Sushma see this gender disparity in the field of literacy among children? "When you look at younger grades, I think it's more women-driven. Most of the teachers there too are women. There is at least a 50% ratio between men and women. But when it comes to higher grades and even competitive exams like IIT and NEET, the ratio is very different - 10% women and 90% men," she said. Sushma is currently engaged in encouraging more women in that space. And it's not easy. "There is a lot of learning required for women. To be able to teach on par with everyone else for IIT-JEE is not easy," she described.

In the US too, there are a lot of women who don't study beyond the 10th grade, but there is no one pulling them back, insisted Sushma. "But that part is missing in India. If I want to study and my parents can't support me, who do I go to?" That's a question that still needs answers, said Sushma. However the positive side is that kids here are more driven, she claimed. "If we can support that, India will see a lot more entrepreneurs coming out of the system."

While employers need to give more opportunities to women, Sushma believes that the onus lies on both sides. "Women seizing those opportunities are essential. They need to be committed to understanding where the gaps are and have the confidence that they'd be able to fill in those gaps," she said.

After taking on the reins of the Group, her focus was on providing various streams, subjects and skill sets needed so that a student is given everything that is part of the chosen field. She pushed for delivering better thinkers, given the "limitations in the education system in India". From 2006 to 2012, the number of students from Sri Chaitanya going into the IITs or All India Medical Universities have gone up by at least 20 times, she said.

"India has this culture of not bringing everyone into the change process," said Sushma, who earlier worked as the change manager in the US for a large healthcare company. The growth and success of Sri Chaitanya rests on the team since every decision was made as a group, she stressed.

Sushma's dream is to make women independent and the way to do so is to prepare more women to face competitive exams and choose better career paths for themselves. She has a special message for emerging women leaders. "Be yourself and have the courage to dream and stand up to difficult situations. Believe in yourself. Women have an amazing skill set to multitask, observe and trigger positive change in any environment. I am constantly blessed to be a woman."

WOMEN in EdTech

A holistic approach to Education

Accessible and affordable education is an indicator of growth and development. During the COVID19 pandemic, among the many sectors that took a hit, education ranked high. It was thrown into chaos with the onset of online classrooms and zoom calls. Student and teacher interfaces from the physical classroom quickly changed to brick boxes on the screen in March 2020. With this change came the challenge of a constant need to adapt to new technology. There were training sessions for teachers, for students, new buttons to press, and revised benchmarks to follow. This was done to create a sustainable educational environment that could substantially replace an offline classroom system.

Throughout history, women have been active majority participants in the education system of India, specifically at the school level. Through generations, women have taken up roles as teachers, mentors, and school principals accelerating the growth of the education sector. An education sector, already brimming with multiple possibilities came up during the time. This was slowly making its place as an alternative and in many cases a supportive system to the existing education industry.

This was the EdTech or Education Technology interface. EdTech entered Indian markets around the 2010s. Companies like Educomp, smart classrooms forayed into this new sector. While Education support companies like Byju's, Extramarks, Whitehat Jr, Coursera, Udemy, Edx, Khan Academy, Google classroom, and Unacademy have developed and grown over the last 10 years (Some of these now having been acquired by others), it was precisely through the years of the pandemic that a sudden boost in their popularity began. Today India ranks second on the global scale as the fastest-growing EdTech industry in the nation. With the pandemic, this industry saw an obvious boom thanks to the need for space-less learning experiences, and women found for them a fertile ground to propel this industry further.

So then, what is EdTech? When and how did it grow into a tangible education sector in India and how has it proven to be a nesting ground for women in leadership roles? It is an interesting trajectory.

When IT tools are introduced into the classroom framework, it helps create better engagements within the teacher-student interface. While technology is used to aid the physical space of the classroom, it has now grown into alternative databases of knowledge through courses offered to anyone and everyone as a way to not only add to the learning experience of primary and higher education students but also for working professionals and less privileged people who are otherwise not able to afford specialized education. The flexibility provided by EdTech companies has enabled more women to pursue careers in this sector. They work from the confines of their homes creating a comfortable space for their development.

Women in EdTech

The sprouting of many EdTech companies in India in the past two years has prompted a much more diverse and wide range of education opportunities than the previous modes of offline classroom teaching. With digital platforms, the problem of women's mobility across long distances and timing can be eliminated, opening up numerous new possibilities for education to grow business. To top off this healthy growth, one also finds women taking center stage as the backbone of this industry. In general, women have landed more managerial and lead roles in the EdTech industry than they have in any other sector. These women have created companies from scratch to aid and quickly propel the mushrooming of educational facilities and opportunities in the country.

Women have always been the front and center of the school education system in India with the majority of roles of teachers being filled by them, the scenario changes when pointed at the managerial roles of these institutions as well as their gender ratio of employment in higher education. EdTech on the other hand shows a refreshing and rapid growth of women in the education sector.

> A significant aspect of this is that women, who have always been in charge of the basics of education at the primary level, gravitate towards the technologically advanced EdTech field. This highlights the importance of EdTech in enabling such spirited growth for women.

EdTechs received $4 billion in funding in the 2021 Union Budget. Women have provided swift and concrete solutions in the chaotic times of pandemic and this has resulted in a wonderful synergy of education through accessible technology.

Women identified problems faced by learners of all ages and developed precise solutions to address them. 'Doubtnut', a company by Tanushree Nagori aims at tackling the issue of resolving doubts in the most feared subjects like science and maths in schools. They claim to resolve close to 4 lakh doubts each day. Another entrepreneur, Shreyasi Singh of Harappa Education worked towards the up-gradation of the already available knowledge base for learners of higher education. Focusing on courses to be more contemporary and relevant, they intended to provide quality knowledge that was updated with their corresponding industries.

Edtechs are providing educational support to students requiring specialized expertise in various areas, including exams in school and college, or cracking entrance exams. Asha Bineesh, the founder of 'Competitive Cracker' started with a Youtube channel that garnered 1 crore revenue by sharing videos to crack entrances for Union Public Service Commission (UPSC). She has since opened up her website and an app to cater to many more specialized entrance exams and help coach students at affordable pricing. Another company called 'Glossaread' started by Sonam Choudhary was started to help create supplementary study material for learners in a systematic structured order as required by universities and colleges. Using diverse forms of materials in video, audio, and written form, the company provides affordability and access to quality study material much required by students of Tier II and Tier III cities. Divya Gokulnath, the cofounder of Byju's has also focused on the creation of a similar support system for learners. By creating short video capsules to tackle crucial concepts, the company provides alternative modes of instruction to bring out better learning outcomes. Focused on result-oriented teaching also enables concrete developments that further helps to map progress at a tangible level, thus ensuring trust in these EdTech companies.

The creation of job opportunities is also the prime concern of the education sector of India. Employability after education becomes the mark of measuring the worth of a course. Shveta Raina, founder, and CEO of 'Talerang' hatched her company to assist students in assertively choosing their careers and working towards attainment and growth in the chosen directions. They provide certificate programs that add a dimension to students' resumes looking for internships and jobs, in turn making them more employable. Services similar to this are specifically designed for holistic career development for women. 'Leap Club', a company co-founded by Ragini Das, as well as 'Kool Kanya' founded by Vanshika Goenka aim at creating an interactive space for women to land jobs and positions of leadership. They not only provide courses but also mentoring and networking opportunities specifically catered towards women. Rather than just building on education, these EdTechs also provide the branching services of transforming one's education into a lucrative career path.

The post-pandemic world has become a lot more humble and sensitive to society and its problems. The world's suffering has refocused on the need to make significant changes for its betterment. This has resulted in many sectors actively looking to be inclusive and oriented towards giving opportunities to the underrepresented. It has been a pleasant development for women to participate in the EdTech industry, which actively strives to inculcate both genders and eradicate the gender gap. Shveta Raina's Talerang research identifies problems and the requirements for their resolution. They estimated that in the education industry, women have had better acceptance and flexibility as well as adaptability into the new world of EdTech.

Innovative and need-based EdTech companies are constantly evolving and creating new grounds and discussions to understand and curate education. From simple classrooms with a blackboard, a teacher facing the students, to a smart class with the usage of electronic screens and now to websites and applications providing assistance in education in many different forms and shapes, EdTech in India has come a long way. Likewise, the career development of women follows its trajectory of progress, so naturally progressed from their roles of teachers and principals of the Indian school classroom to the EdTech companies, now learning and creating new forms of learning that would be in sync with the changing world and the 21st century; the era of technology.

Not only education but with the pandemic, unemployment has also been a cause of mass concern around the world. In India, EdTech companies are striving towards the creation of more employment not only in their sector but in all other segments. These companies provide services to bridge the gap between education and employment. With more and more people focused on finding a job, these companies cater to their demands by creating services that help people find jobs. Specifically, scientific learning like coding, artificial intelligence, AR and VR have been made affordable and accessible. Knowledge today is indeed available at a fingertip and thanks to EdTechs, not only knowledge but also degrees and certificates, educational and professional networks, workshops, lectures and much more is available easily.

> Women have become prominent champions in the field of EdTechs. In the future, it is up to them to provide solutions for further accessibility and inclusivity of knowledge to the remotest of areas in the country.

Indian women have already begun to make waves. Therefore, it will not be too extravagant to expect them to make huge strides and advances in the fields of education and career development.

ENTREPRENEURIAL JOURNEY OF Dr. MARIAZEENA JOHNSON

Dr. Mariazeena Johnson is the Chancellor of Sathyabama Institute of Science and Technology, Chennai, one of the leading Universities in India. She is an edupreneur and a great visionary, who incorporated "Inclusive Model" of education in the institution.

Her journey as an entrepreneur and as a social activist has the noble motive of societal progress and empowering individuals and systems of education. A strong believer of infusing technology into entrepreneurial ventures has various achievements to her credit, which are driven by technological innovations.

Women entrepreneurs are most successful in past few decades. Dr.Mariazeena Johnson is one such "ICONIC EDUPRENEUR". Humble beginnings as the Director of the institution to Nation's one among 100 most impactful women award and top 12 women transformers of India, her work as an entrepreneur is evident from the way she transformed "Sathyabama" as a place to learn to place to grow. NIRF rankings, reputed bodies accreditation to various programmes and Global recognition are glimpses of her leadership eminence. The way she is inspiring the youth, budding entrepreneurs is phenomenal. She is a role model for many, inspirational with her wit and winning spirit.

Learned from success, the means to reduce redundant mistakes, she is ever passionate to surpass her own benchmarks of excellence. Understanding gaps in the market, methods to explore the human potential and optimum utilization of resources are keys in her entrepreneurial success. She also proved that the perseverance is the crucial element but not the inheritance alone in entrepreneurial success.

Dr.Mariazeena likes challenges, challenge the obstacles and makes obstacles as opportunities. A powerful leader in tapping the hidden potential of people. In her words "Leaders are not just successful people; they see indeed the people in their success". She strongly believes and always says that "I am representing my team's hardwork". She believes in such leadership quotient that is bigger than our own imagination and humble in the accomplishments.

Entrepreneurship is all about live and let live, Dr.Mariazeena adopted this philosophy in her life as humanitarian, a patron of around 30 renowned foundations & trusts. Always strives to reach the unreachable, assist the most deserving and lifts the life of downtrodden with her strong conviction. War prisoner children to acid-victims, divyangs to economically deserving are educated through her model of inclusivity.

Dr.Mariazeena Johnson is a motivator to many with her ever encouraging, thought provoking speech. She is the epitome leadership qualities who fine tunes the pressure to pleasure, targets unforeseen outcomes, prepares team for unexpected challenges and transforms an ordinary to extraordinary performance.

A strong campaigner of "Today's work for an inspiring tomorrow", her inclusive model of education has given hope for countless lives. She is the personification of many good traits of a successful entrepreneur.

Dr. MARIAZEENA JOHNSON
ChancellorSathyabama Institute
of Science and Technology (Deemed to be
University) Chennai, India

Bringing fresh talent and new perspectives to the field of education...

Aradhana Galgotia

the brilliant and savvy scion of the Galgotia family is passionate about her role as an educationist who believes in leaving a mark of excellence in whatever she undertakes with her intelligence, determination and ingenuity.

QA

Ms. Aradhana Galgotia did her Political Science Hons. from the esteemed Jesus & Mary College under Delhi University and successfully completed her Masters in Law from the prestigious Queen Mary University, London.

ARADHANA GALGOTIA
Director -Operations, Galgotias University

It is an underlying truth that with the paradigm shift in the prevailing trends, women are taking center stage and having enormous influence in decision making like top leaders in the world. They are not only excelling in all walks of life wherever they are taking plunge into, they are also instrumental in bringing far-reaching changes in various fields with their innovative ideas. They are being widely acknowledged amongst the change-makers in the World. One such change-maker is Ms. Aradhana Galgotia, a Charismatic Personality with the resolute determination.

HARBINGER OF CHANGE:

Ms. Aradhana Galgotia completed her LLM in Intellectual Property Rights from the Queen Mary University of London which gave her Global perspective on the Higher Education. The Long stint with the Highly Esteemed University from UK made her realize that theoretical knowledge is not enough to sustain and survive in the Industry.

She deeply felt the need of bringing the radical changes in the current Indian Education system wherein major emphasis must be given on Holistic teaching and Learning system.

International Education System greatly inspired her to transform the education system from Theory-based to Practical-based Learning as well as implementing their best practices at the University.

COMMITMENT TOWARDS THE NOBLE CAUSE:

Ms. Aradhana Galgotia is a Humanitarian who is committed towards the noble cause of social upliftment and empowerment of destitute.

She would like to ensure the success of women in different walks of Life by imparting the Value based education.

BIGGEST STRENGTH OF YOUR INSTITUTION:

An Amalgamation of various factors including shared vision, intellectually stimulating learning environment, Visionary & Inspiring Leadership as well as State-of-the-Art Infrastructure constitute the driving forces for an Academic Institution of Eminence like Galgotias.

In my opinion, Our Core Strengths are our Holistic and Coordinated approach towards the attainment of Unified Goals & Objectives for the Esteemed Academic Institution.

CHANGES LIKELY TO BE MADE IN YOUR INSTITUTION:

Adequate Thrust on building the practical skills and technical support have always been amongst our priority areas. At the same time, our constant endeavour must be towards reinventing new methods and processes for maximizing the productivity.

THINGS WHICH MAKE YOU PROUD ABOUT THE INSTITUTION:

The relentless efforts being made by our committed and passionate people in achieving academic excellence, interpersonal relationships and Leadership development make me immensely proud about my Institution.

YOUR PASSION:

I am passionate about learning new things for broadening my Intellectual horizon. Self-Learning is a precious gift which one could gives to oneself.

Thirst and quest for the knowledge is an expression which has been used very often but their significance in the Life can't be ruled out.

MESSAGE FOR THE YOUTH

One should never get overburdened with the expectations of people around them but relish the journey and go with the flow.

FAVOURITE SPORTS:

In view of the significance of sports in improving Physical & Mental Fitness as well as building the overall personality, I gave a lot of emphasis upon playing the indoor and outdoor games. I have been an avid sportsperson and active participant since my school days. During my formative years, I had interest in Swimming and playing Tennis. With the passage of time, I realized the importance of concentration for attaining success in Life which prompted me to learn the nuances of Golf as well.

> “I am passionate about learning new things for broadening my Intellectual horizon. Self-Learning is a precious gift which one could gives to oneself. Thirst and quest for the knowledge is an expression which has been used very often but their significance in the Life can't be ruled out.”
>
> **Aradhana Galgotia**

MY FITNESS MANTRA:

I believe in striking a perfect balance in everything I do. Setting a timeframe for the task to be accomplished and strictly adhering to it definitely helps an Individual to remain disciplined in his or her approach. It's always the small consistencies which contribute towards the Long-term success in Life.

YOUR VIEWPOINT ON SUCCESS:

According to me, Success is Short Lived. One should be inward looking for experiencing tranquillity and bliss. Hard work, perseverance, dedication, honesty and self-learning should be a way of Life.

YOUR FAVOURITE PASTIME:

In my spare time, I love reading all kinds of books on the multifarious topics. Ms. Aradhana Galgotia is an avid reader and writes reviews on books which are being published in the leading magazines and newspapers from the country.

MY NEXT GOAL

The constant goal is to keep up-grading and upskilling the Indian Education system and work towards a holistic teaching and learning approach.

MY INSPIRATION

I get my inspiration from women all over the world who have carved a niche for themselves.

MY STRENGTH

My strength lies in my perseverance and in my ability to adapt in different situations.

A perfect embodiment of Modesty, Candor & Determination

Mrs. Satya Bhalla

A mentor, a humanitarian and a firm believer of ethics, ideals and traditions, she is an epitome of a Captain who sails the ship through its glorious journey.

QA

Smt. Satya Bhalla lights the path of success for Manav Rachna Educational Institutions with her enlightening insights, leadership and the determination of building a sustainable society where all genders are given equal opportunities.

SATYA BHALLA
Chief Patron
MREI

HARBINGER OF CHANGE

The role of women has been of great importance in the progression of a family, society and the country. Mrs. Satya Ji believes that for a sustainable future of society, it's not just education for women that's critical. Opportunities that women get to explore their skills, talents and interests also contribute equally to the advancement of society.

Education is a major milestone that needs to be attained to ensure women's empowerment as it is the only thing that enables them to face the challenges and respond to them constructively.

Chief Patron of Manav Rachna Educational Institutions, Smt. Satya Bhalla has guided the leaders of Manav Rachna to help turn it into a Center for Excellence in Education over the past 25 years. Her role has been monumental in making sure that MREI follows the path of diversity in education by creating an environment that empowers young minds to explore their ideas, thoughts and skills.

TAKING THE LEGACY FORWARD

To take the legacy of Dr. O P Bhalla forward, Smt. Satya Bhalla constituted Dr. O P Bhalla Foundation as a tribute to his vision of Nation Building and upliftment of the underprivileged & underserved sections of the society.

> Smt. Satya Bhalla is the one who spearheaded the Global Cooperative Exchange of Knowledge at MREI involving young students and scholars as she believes that this is important for building a sustainable society.

The foundation focuses on undertaking developmental activities, research and training in various fields, such as education, sustainable development and environmental protection, gender equality, health and social wellbeing.

PILLAR OF STRENGTH FOR THE INSTITUTIONS

She takes forward the legacy left behind by her husband Dr. O P Bhalla who is the visionary behind the existence of Manav Rachna. She supported him in shaping the educational movement dedicated to training and equipping the students with skills and knowledge in their chosen fields while also giving them the understanding of ethos and values that will empower them to face the challenges and transform society.

She spearheaded the Global Cooperative Exchange of Knowledge at MREI involving young students and scholars as she believes that it is important for building a sustainable society.

She has strongly supported programs that encourage our young people to learn about different cultures, experience the world first-hand, and learn about gender equality. Her goal is to contribute to the sustainable and peaceful development of human society through educational activities, together with the faculty and students.

New year at Manav Rachna begins with the traditional Maha Mrityunjaya Yajna, which is an integral part of the Manav Rachna's tradition, and Smt. Satya Bhalla along with her family leads the traditional prayers for peace and togetherness.

> I have aimed to inculcate the importance of quality education that focuses on the highest ideals of service, ultimately enabling students to make moral judgements based on sound reasoning. It is our ultimate goal to constantly work towards the upliftment of society, following the footsteps of our Founder visionary Dr. O P Bhalla. Teaching young minds about gender equality today is a way of ensuring a sustainable tomorrow.

Smt. Satya Bhalla

DR. O P BHALLA FOUNDATION

Dr. O P Bhalla Foundation works for social upliftment through initiatives like

- Special Fee Scholarship
- SATHI- a 24x7 mental health helpline
- Skill development programs with SkillEd India
- Women Empowerment
- Hygiene Awareness
- Free Sanitary Pads Distribution
- Adoption of Villages
- PNG Cremation Facility
- Waste Management
- Ek Mutthi Daan

MY NEXT GOAL

My next goal is to ensure that our youth learns about the importance of gender equality and the value of perseverance.

MY INSPIRATION

I find my inspiration in the words of my guiding light, my late husband Dr. O P Bhalla who always said that what matters the most is the difference you can make in people's lives.

MY STRENGTH

My greatest strength lies with the youth of Manav Rachna Educational Institutions. I learn new things from them every single day. They are my biggest power.

The ideal integration of tradition and modernity

Anshu Agarwal

Women are known for their tenacity and strength when it comes to achieving extraordinary feats. There are several empirical evidence that substantiate women's power in the world today. Women are being considered for many important roles in government and the corporate sector in today's society. Women are frequently found in positions of independent decision making and strategic planning due to their exceptional abilities and proven credentials in multitasking and team management.

QA

Anshu Agarwal of GL Bajaj Educational Institutions is becoming a massive inspiration for all such women in the country who have an entrepreneurial desire to succeed while also carving a niche in their core area of expertise.

Anshu Agarwal
Board Member
GL Bajaj Educational Institutions

Mrs. Anshu Agarwal is recognised not just among India's established businesspeople, but also as a personification of the Indian value system. She is the ideal combination of extensive experience and modernity. Her entrepreneurial mindset was formed by her background in a notable business family.

HARBINGER OF CHANGE:

Mrs. Anshu Agarwal has emerged as a Change Agent for the prestigious GL Bajaj Educational Institutions. She is a firm believer in the law of nature, which is change. Even if you don't want it to happen, it's unavoidable. As a result, she is always emphasising the importance of implementing all of the most recent technologies and methodologies across all of GL Bajaj Educational Institutions.

She has travelled extensively to nations such as the United States, Japan, Germany, Canada, Australia, and others in order to assess and comprehend differences, as well as to update course content and methodology. She has made a tremendous contribution to GL Bajaj Educational Institutions by introducing some substantial reforms. She was a driving force behind the introduction of virtual classes and the introduction of industrial robots to the GL Bajaj Institute for practical training of students. For the benefit of the pupils, she had also implemented in-house skill development training programmes and add-on certification programmes.

COMMITMENT TOWARDS THE NOBLE CAUSE:

Mrs. Agarwal is a strong advocate for women's empowerment and is well-known for doing so. Women's empowerment, she claims, is about achieving an autonomous identity and financial independence for all women. As a result, she collaborates with a variety of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) dedicated to women's skill development. She has also worked with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that promote topics such as health, hygiene, and underprivileged children.

BIGGEST STRENGTH OF YOUR INSTITUTION:

It's said that every successful man has a woman behind him. Mrs. Anshu Agarwal, as a visionary entrepreneur, lends her support to GL Bajaj Educational Institutions. Mrs. Anshu Agarwal's father-in-law, Dr. RK Agarwal, commends her for her foresight and inspiring leadership. He also admires her decision-making abilities and her ability to think outside the box in all that she does.

CHANGES LIKELY TO BE MADE IN YOUR INSTITUTION:

Mrs. Anshu Agarwal is completely sold on our Hon'ble Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi's 'Make in India' initiative.

She intends to provide more opportunities for students, particularly female students, who want to start their own businesses in the near future. She collaborates closely with the campus's entrepreneurial Cell and incubation centre to develop long-term strategies for student startups. Mrs. Anshu Agarwal is deeply committed to fostering a culture of entrepreneurship on campus. She is working hard to attract more national and international investors for the campus's burgeoning startups.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS WHICH IS MAKING YOU PROUD ABOUT THE INSTITUTION:

Without a doubt, our position in the NIRF, as announced by the Government of India's Ministry of Human Resources Development. Some of India's leading media outlets, including the Times of India, India Today, and Dataquest, have also ranked us among the top educational institutions in the country. Furthermore, I am proud of the campus culture. Everyone, from the learned professors to the deserving students, believes in the indigenous value system. This provides a solid foundation for learning cutting-edge technologies without fear of losing one's personal identity. I am also proud of the students' consistently high placement rates. University results and research work, on the other hand, are noteworthy.

YOUR PASSION:

Work is my passion. Regardless of what I do, I strive for excellence. Quality is essential to me. As a result, I'm always striving to be a better version of myself. This drive for excellence keeps my spirits up..

MESSAGE FOR THE WOMEN:

All women must break beyond the glass ceiling. Since a new wave of women's empowerment is in full swing, it is the joint obligation of all women to firmly maintain their positions in whatever hats they wish to wear. So, my advise is to recognise how critical it is to strike a careful balance between all of the positions.

FAVOURITE SPORTS:

I believe that a healthy mind lives in a healthy body, so I participate in sports on a regular basis. Hiking, gliding, surfing, and scuba diving are some of my favourite adventure sports. Sports, in my opinion, are the best way to learn discipline, improve concentration, and build team spirit.

> Breaking the glass ceiling is a must for all the women. Since a new wave of women empowerment is in the full swing, it is the collective responsibility of all the women to strongly hold their position in all the hats they aspire to wear. So, my advice is to understand the importance of striking the judicious balance between all the roles.

Anshu Agarwal

MY FITNESS MANTRA:

Reading a wide range of topics satisfies my intellectual curiosity and provides vital stimulus to my brain, as I am a voracious reader. I don't go to the gym on a regular basis, but I do regularly practise yoga and meditation. Even with my busy commitments, I maintain a balanced diet and never forget to hydrate myself. In Indian classical dancing, I frequently move my legs.

YOUR VIEWPOINT ON SUCCESS:

For me, success is defined as finding joy with whatever one is doing. I believe that it is the level of commitment, passion, dedication, and hard work you put in to achieve the results that is important, not the results themselves. As a result, my definition of success is not the end result, but the genuine efforts one wishes to make.

YOUR FAVOURITE PASTIME:

As I aforementioned, I enjoy winding down with literature, particularly poetry of all kinds, to boost my creative abilities. I also enjoy listening to ghazals because they are so meaningful. I also believe that literature teaches us empathy, which is a valuable skill for humanity

MY NEXT GOAL

I am keen on building world class institutions and will continue with the same.

MY INSPIRATION

Indeed, its my father- in-law. His zeal for life and progress, is a constant source of inspiration for me.

MY STRENGTH

Even every successful women has a man behind her. My husband has always been my biggest strength.

A traveler I am, and a navigator, and every day I discover a new region within my soul.

Dr Shalya Raj

Dr. Shalya is a simple, calm, and inspirational thought leader. Her leadership style is to create a connection with her people, and instead of relying on developing personality charisma, it focuses on connecting emotionally. She has the banality of attracting talented people, mainly because she actually values the people. She explains everything with clarity, simplicity, and purity. She is not just a good leader but also a great mentor. She nurtures a great team and goes beyond what she can do to get her team's efforts well recognized.

QA

She is an endodontist by profession, and is actively involved in research, teaching, guiding research studentsand has numerous worthy publications to her credit. As the CEO of the University, she inspires people to take a leap of faith, she also wants them to take tough calls and break the cocoon. This makes her an easy-to-approach leader who is kind, compassionate and driven.

DR. SHALYA RAJ
CEO
Subharti University

KNACK FOR INNOVATION

Dr. Shalya Raj has a knack for innovation. She believes in introducing, promoting and practising new ideas and thought processes. She has brought about myriad changes in the university to facilitate innovation. Besides, she is a diehard environmentalist who follows the dictum "Go Green" by heart. The lush green campus of Subharti University is the brainchild of Dr. Shalya. Being a transformational leader, she has ensured major changes in the past few years such as, maximum use of solar energy, solar driven vehicles, encouraging use of bicycles, rain water harvesting, preparation of compost pits etc.

One more uniqueinitiative of Dr. Shalya has been "One person adopts two Trees" initiative which has seen voluntary participation from all quarters- be it the students, teaching or non-teaching staff. Her other involvement is with "Unmukt Bharat," an organization which believes in providing the basic amenities to the needy.

As an active member of Unmukt Bharat she has been conducting drives like clothes, food, medicine, footwear etc. donation to the underprivileged and downtrodden, be it of any caste, creed or religion. In order to make life comfortable and convenient for the working women, she came up with the idea of providing free crèche facilities on the campus. She is a staunch believer of Right to Education and is directly and passionately overseeing the free education for the children of the labour class.

BIGGEST STRENGTH OF YOUR INSTITUTION & THINGS WHICH MAKE YOU PROUD ABOUT THE INSTITUTION

The motto of Swami Vivekanand Subharti University is "Shiksha, Seva, Sanskaaravem Rashtriyata". We have a proud tradition of translating knowledge into social-minded action reflected in our inclusive policies, innovative work, and impactful engagement of our faculty, students, and staff. As we continue to work our way through the pandemic, we have every confidence that the months ahead will see the University continue to shine with new research discoveries, extraordinary patient care, continued excellence in the classroom and a caring commitment to our community.

Subharti University is at the frontier of academic and intellectual discovery. Those who venture here—to learn, research, teach, work, and grow—join us in the pursuit of truth, knowledge, and a better world.At Subharti, we reviveand recreate the lived experiences of our national heroes. Their life accounts have been prominently displayed at the respective colleges which are named after them. We fervently celebrate the birth anniversaries and the martyrdom days of these icons and reaffirm our faith to always remember the sacrifices made by our national heroes and our commitment to internalize the same set of values that help us become a better version of ourselves.

CHANGES LIKELY TO BE MADE IN YOUR INSTITUTION

Since change is the only constant, the university plans to expand and grow in terms of infrastructural facilities for introducing new and creative streams of education like DM courses in medical field, agriculture sciences, College for Differently Abled, vocational training centre, building a world class stadium and many more. The idea is to come up with a world class infrastructure that caters to the optimum standards of professional education.

MESSAGE TO THE YOUTH

The vitality and ability of the youth of our nation is unmatched. I would like to assert that no horizon is too far and our youth can always reach beyond it or above it. They got to learn to make a personal commitment to excellence and must show courage in failure and humility in success to match learning with compassion.

MY LEISURE TIME

In my downtime, I love spending time with my kids. I am fond of outdoor activities such as swimming and playing badminton. I am not into gyming but I keep myself agile like I usually prefer taking the flight of stairs rather than the elevators. I am also an avid reader. Reading transports me to another world and I completely enjoy the process.

YOUR VIEWPOINT ON SUCCESS

I firmly believe that if you just work on the stuff that you are passionate about, you don't need to have a master plan with how things will play out. I focus not on success but significance and then even the small steps and little victories along my path take on greater meaning. Success to me is the progressive realization of worthy goals. I juggle with my administrative tasks and blissfully play the role of a doting wife and mother to my children as for a long time now, my vocation is my vacation.

> "The vitality and ability of the youth of our nation is unmatched. I would like to assert that no horizon is too far and our youth can always reach beyond it or above it. They got to learn to make a personal commitment to excellence and must show courage in failure and humility in success to match learning with compassion."
>
> **Dr. Shalya Raj**

AWARDS & ACHIEVEMENT

- The Influential Women Award 2021 by Arunodaya organization.
- The Education Covid-19 Warrior of the Year 2020 award by Asia Today.
- The Empower women prosperous India Award-2019 by Globe Media on 8th Anniversary.
- Certificate of Participation, Resurrecting Function, Form & Esthetics The Phoenix Effect Organized by Department of Conservative Dentistry and Endodontics on 6th August 2019.
- Certificate of Special Achievement, Naari Shakti Ko Pranaam, In recognition for a record of outstanding accomplishments By Brijbhoomi Founation, 19th June 2019.
- Certificate of participation "INDIAN-MYANMAR CULTURAL EXCHANGE PROGRAM 2018" By Ambassador of Myanmar to India.

MY NEXT GOAL

My next goal is to make my University as an Internationally recognized University and at the same time work for the safety of our women.

MY INSPIRATION

I take my inspiration from the life of my parents who always worked dedicatedly & selflessly for betterment of the society.

MY STRENGTH

My greatest strength lies in my family. They are the biggest support behind my success.

THE BIG PRIVATISATION PUSHBACK

By January this year, the Centre had achieved just five per cent of its Rs 1.75 lakh crore divestment target for FY22. What ails the privatisation process, and what's the way out?

BY SHWWETA PUNJ

IN RECENT YEARS, disinvestment has been a major watchword for the Centre. Last year, its budget was in some senses even anchored on expected disinvestment revenue, with the government looking to earn Rs 1.75 lakh crore from the monetisation of PSUs (public sector undertakings) like Air India, BPCL (Bharat Petroleum Corporation Limited) and SCI (Shipping Corporation of India). However, as of December 2021, the government had met just about five per cent of that target, or Rs 9,240 crore. In her budget this year, Union finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman indirectly acknowledged the huge miss by scaling down the FY22 disinvestment revenue projection from Rs 1.75 lakh crore to Rs 78,000 crore and setting the 2022-23 target at just Rs 65,000 crore.

For several years, the Centre has faced a host of troubles in making good on its privatisation promises, be it a pushback from employee unions worried about their future or trouble generating investor interest. Many PSUs on the block also have complex, damaged balance sheets, making it difficult to value them accurately. Tuhin Kanta Pandey, secretary, DIPAM (Department of Investment and Public Asset Management), says the government is mindful of the challenges and has shifted focus from diluting PSU holdings to full privatisation. The sale of Air India to the Tata Group has been encouraging, though it brought the government only Rs 2,700 crore in cash. Pandey hopes to repeat this success.

Other PSUs on the block include IDBI Bank (which did not find mention in this year's budget speech) and helicopter operator Pawan Hans. Despite the continued privatisation push, the Centre's budget this year is

> **"THE LIC IPO IS A BIG OPPORTUNITY BECAUSE WE ARE BRINGING SOMETHING NEW TO THE MARKET. OTHERWISE, THE SCOPE TO RAISE MONEY THROUGH DIVESTMENT IS LIMITED"**
>
> **TUHIN KANTA PANDEY**
> *Secretary, DIPAM*

STILL ON THE BLOCK The BPCL plant in Mumbai

MANDAR DEODHAR

much more conservative in expectation and objective. For one, it sets no targets for the divestment of PSBs (public sector banks) and financial institutions—a politically contentious area—and revises last year's target for it to nil from Rs 1 lakh crore. A hoped-for success is the upcoming LIC IPO (Life Insurance Corporation initial public offering), expected to launch on March 11. Fund managers say the IPO could raise between Rs 50,000 crore and Rs 1 lakh crore, but with war breaking out in Ukraine, the government might choose to delay the launch, which will have consequences for its divestment agenda. Meanwhile, Tata Steel has also acquired a 93.2 per cent stake in the government's Neelachal Ispat Nigam, a steel manufacturer, for Rs 12,100 crore.

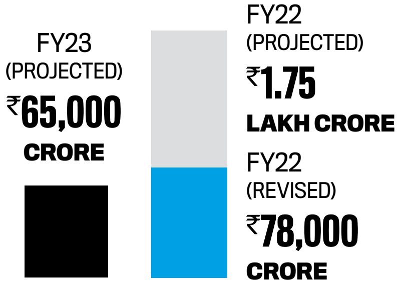
MISSED TARGETS

The list of missed divestment targets includes firms that have now spent years on the block. Pawan Hans, for example, has been on sale for 10 years. The firm's revenues have reportedly been falling since 2016, with losses in 2019 and 2020. Last year, the Centre made another attempt to sell it, relaxing its earlier terms to attract more buyers. In December, it announced it had received bids, but little has been said on the matter since.

Another example is the sale of BPCL. So far, the government has had to extend its deadline for filing preliminary expressions of interest four times. Part of the trouble has to do with the sector—with crude oil prices highly volatile in recent years, it has been difficult to generate investor interest in energy companies. On the block is the government's entire 52.98 per cent stake in BPCL, for which it says it has received three expressions of interest. Ratings agency Fitch rates the firm BBB- with a negative outlook, saying "uncertainty over the bidder consortiums and process complexity, including valuation, may lead to potential delays in the privatisation of India's second-largest fuel retailer." Similarly, the sale of SCI remains in limbo because bidders have found it difficult to complete their due diligence of the firm's assets.

A major hurdle to privatisation, across sectors, has been the

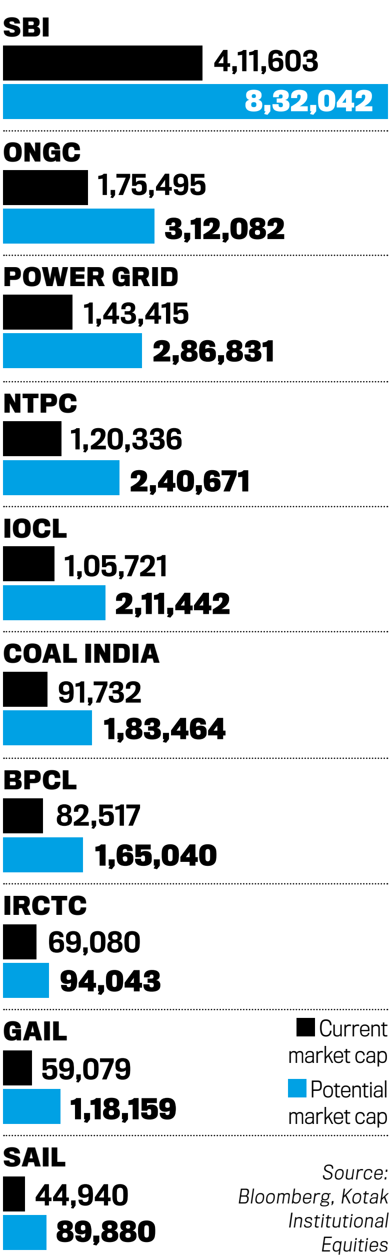
DIVESTMENT DOLDRUMS



BELOW POTENTIAL

PSUs often have stunted valuations because of poor efficiency, innovation and so on

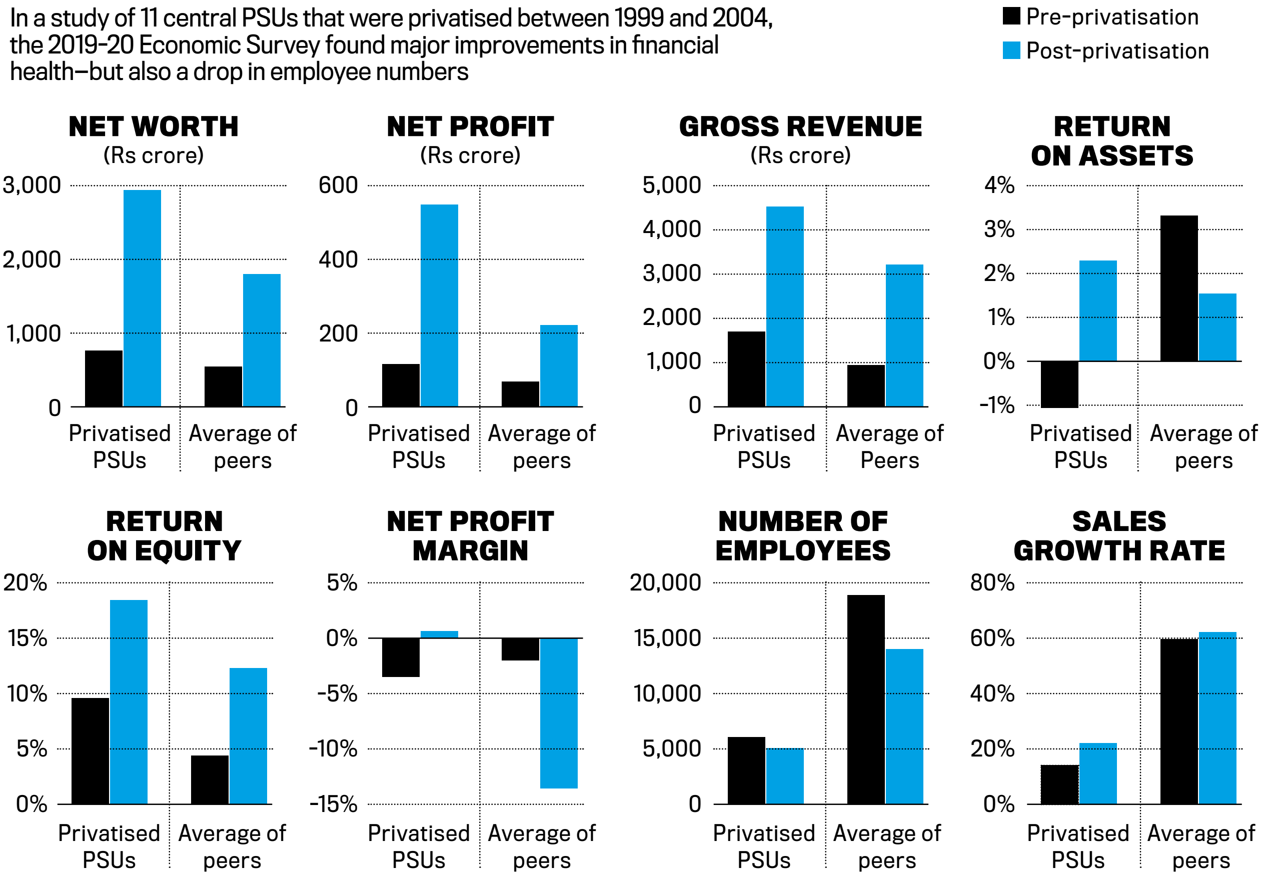
(Rs crore)



Source: Bloomberg, Kotak Institutional Equities

BEFORE AND AFTER

In a study of 11 central PSUs that were privatised between 1999 and 2004, the 2019-20 Economic Survey found major improvements in financial health—but also a drop in employee numbers



Note: The performances of the privatised PSUs and their peers were compared over 10-year periods before and after the year of privatisation

Source: Economic Survey 2019-20

Graphics by TANMOY CHAKRABORTY

pushback from employee unions. On the morning of January 27, the day DIPAM was to officially hand over Air India to the Tata Group, officials attended a virtual hearing of the Madras High Court. The court had taken up a petition by an employees' union against the sale of Air India, citing worries about the future welfare of current workers. Worried that employee activism and litigation could scupper the sale, the government agreed to almost all the union's demands in this particular case, including the continuation of medical benefits for retiring and retired Air India employees, the encashment of leaves, and so on.

ON JANUARY 27, THE DAY THE CENTRE WAS TO HAND OVER AIR INDIA TO THE TATA GROUP, DIPAM OFFICIALS ATTENDED A VIRTUAL HEARING OF THE MADRAS HIGH COURT BECAUSE OF A PETITION FROM THE EMPLOYEES' UNION CHALLENGING THE SALE

Employee unions are almost never in favour of divestment. Major reasons include job security and pay levels. "PSU employees want to stay [in the public sector] because they get three times the salary of their counterparts in the private sector," says Nilesh Shah, MD of Kotak Mahindra Asset Management. "The average BPCL salary is Rs 20 lakh per annum—the average private sector employee makes a third of that."

Another systemic problem is the complexity of PSU balance sheets, which makes it difficult to value such firms. In addition to the massive debt they often carry, many government undertakings also come bundled with unwanted assets. Air India again is a good example—the sale required the airline's non-core assets (including real estate like Centaur Hotel) and about Rs 51,000 crore of its debt to be partitioned off into an

SPV (special purpose vehicle). After many rounds of discussions, it was also decided to sell the airline on its enterprise value (market cap plus net debt) rather than its equity value. An official closely involved with the project says it was only after these decisions were taken that the Centre was able to find bidders. “We faced many hurdles with the sale of Air India,” admits Pandey. “Bidders were scared.” When it comes to the sale of BPCL, the government may once again have to take the asset-separation route, since a major stumbling block is the firm’s massive real estate assets.

According to DIPAM, in 2021-22, the government had received about Rs 44,450 crore as of January 3 from various subsidiaries. Of this, only Rs 9,329.9 crore was from divestment, with the remaining Rs 35,116.72 crore being dividend receipts.

NEXT UP

In one sense, the government’s divestment challenge becomes harder with every success, since what remains on the block are firms that investors have already passed on. Pandey says, “Except for the new listings—for example LIC’s IPO, which is a big opportunity because we are bringing something new to the market—the scope is very limited for the government to raise money through divestment. We have been diluting our stakes in existing companies. If we want to [reduce our stake] below 51 per cent, then we are talking about privatisation and handing over management control.”

The to-do list so far includes IDBI, SCI, BPCL and Pawan Hans, which have proved hard to sell for various reasons. A senior official closely involved with the divestment effort says, “Pawan Hans has been on the block for 10 years, and it will be tough to find buyers for IDBI because of the bank’s poor competitiveness. Most companies are also saddled with tarnished assets.”

One challenge the government will have to grapple with is how to sustain investor interest through the process.

> **“PSU EMPLOYEES WANT TO STAY IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR BECAUSE THEY GET THREE TIMES THE SALARY OF THEIR COUNTERPARTS IN THE PRIVATE SECTOR”**
>
> **NILESH SHAH**
> *MD, Kotak Mahindra Asset Management*

Frequently, bidders have grown cold midway through their valuation/ due diligence reviews, perhaps realising just how difficult it will be to take over the management of a PSU. In addition to the depreciated assets, massive debt and complicated asset holdings, there is also the challenge of bringing many different stakeholders—employee unions, the existing PSU management, bidders, regulators and policymakers—all onto the same page. Though the political leadership appears determined to see this through, the scaled-down divestment targets in the 2022-’23 budget indicate an acknowledgement of the enormity of this challenge.

The difficulty is also aggravated by continuity issues in DIPAM. Secretaries have relatively short tenures—three years—but building, sustaining and channelling the investor interest needed to divest a PSU is an enormous effort. It involves not just a marketing blitz but also careful financial analysis and a strategic regulatory and political campaign to steer the deal to a successful conclusion.

There are no easy answers to privatisation. Experts say clear plans and quick decision-making could help. It is also crucial to speed up the sales to plug asset erosion—Air India’s debt doubled in the period between the first announcement of its privatisation and its eventual handover to the Tata Group. The reopening of old cases by the judiciary—such as the one relating to a divestment deal conducted under the watch of former IAS officer Pradeep Baijal, or one relating to the divestment of Hindustan Zinc years after the deal was concluded—also has a chilling effect on bureaucratic speed.

Shah says the Centre may find it efficient to adopt the Singapore model. In that country, one firm, Temasek Holdings, manages the investments and assets formerly held by the government, while another—GIC (formerly the Government of Singapore Investment Corporation)—manages the government’s financial assets. This frees up ministries to do policy work by handing over the privatisation process to professionals. Yet another option is to tap equity markets to dilute PSU stakes and let a private board manage these firms. Meanwhile, amendments to the General Insurance Business (Nationalisation) Act were cleared during the monsoon session of Parliament. The Banking Laws (Amendment) Bill 2021, relating to the privatisation of two PSBs, was also listed for introduction in the winter session of 2021, but opposition from bank unions and state elections have delayed its tabling.

The fact that billionaire investor Rajesh Jhunjhunwala chose to launch his own airline rather than bid for Air India is a lesson for the Centre. There are many reasons India’s ailing PSUs remain stuck on the block—from their poor competitiveness and massive debt to the continuing asset erosion and the pushback from employee unions. If the Centre is committed to achieving its divestment targets, it is critical for these problems to be addressed quickly and comprehensively. ■

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IN THEIR SIGHTS

PROPOSED AMENDMENTS TO THE WILDLIFE PROTECTION ACT COULD MAKE IT EASIER FOR CULLS TO TAKE PLACE. SOME WANT TO TAKE IT A STEP FURTHER AND LEGALISE HUNTING IN INDIA

By Rahul Noronha

For the past half century, India's natural world has been governed by the Wild Life (Protection) Act, 1972 (WPA), a broad legislation that covers everything from protected areas and wildlife crimes to hunting and legal safeguards for various species. It has been amended many times, with a latest round of revision in late 2021, when the Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change invited public comments and proposals on a new draft amendment. One of the ministry's proposals was to ease restrictions on declaring certain species as 'vermin', without which culls of dangerous animals cannot be conducted (see *Culling a History*). Though this was a narrow, specific proposal, the public comments showed opinions fiercely divided over the core idea—hunting.

Some public proposals to the ministry's amendment seek relaxed restrictions on hunting, and have sparked especially fierce debate. (India has had a broad ban on hunting since 1972, when the WPA was enacted.) Those in favour point out that many countries allow it, and say it could be a source of revenue through the sale of hunting licences. They also say current bans on hunting are a result of politics. Broadly, there are two lines of support—rural Indians like farmers, for whom man-animal conflict is a frequent reality, and those who see hunting as a route to revenue.

H.S. Pabla, a former Indian Forest Service officer and chief wildlife warden, points out a grey area in the law. "Currently, a farmer chasing an animal feeding on his crops can be booked for 'hunting' based on the definition in the WPA," he says. Pabla's record adds weight to his perspective—it was during his tenure that tigers were brought back to Panna, bison to Bandhavgarh and swamp deer to Satpura, reintroducing these species to habitats they had vanished from. He says the WPA should be amended to incorporate newer thinking on conservation, which includes ensuring communities benefit from wildlife.

"A farmer chasing an animal feeding on his crops can be booked for 'hunting' based on the definition in the WPA"

H.S. PABLA
Former chief wildlife warden

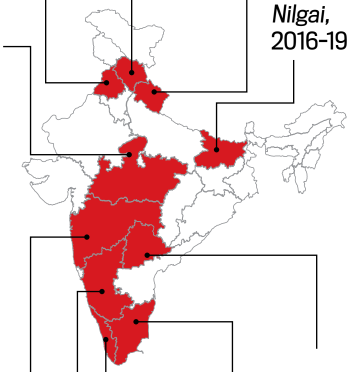
A related proposal has to do with the way species are listed under the Act,

ANIMAL, PEST OR RESOURCE?
Nilgai in Bulandshahr district, UP

PRASHANTH VISHWANATHAN/GETTY IMAGES

CULLING A HISTORY

In the past six years, at least 10 states across India have issued notifications declaring various species (mostly wild boar and *nilgai*) as 'vermin' to permit their culling. The practice continues



PUNJAB
Wild boar, 2017 onward

HIMACHAL PRADESH
Monkeys (rhesus macaque), 2016-20

UTTARAKHAND
Nilgai and wild boar, 2018-21

BIHAR
Nilgai, 2016-19

MADHYA PRADESH
Wild boar and *nilgai*, 2002 onward (no licences to hunt issued)

MAHARASHTRA
Wild boar and *nilgai*, 2016

TELANGANA
Wild boar, 2021-22

KARNATAKA
Wild boar, 2017, 2021

KERALA
Wild boar, 2021

TAMIL NADU
Wild boar, 2017, 2020

and the protections they get. Currently, there are six lists ('schedules') that mandate varying levels of protection, with Schedule I species having the most protection. When it comes to man-animal conflict, the government can designate any species—except those in Schedule I and some in II—as 'vermin' for a period of time. This permits hunting, the rationale being that a cull provides a short-term (if bloody) solution. The new proposals go further, permitting the government to declare even protected species as vermin. Some experts are in favour—Pabla, for one, describes the leopards of Mumbai and the Asiatic lions in rural Gujarat as potential vermin, since man-animal conflict threatens human life. He also argues for the creation of private wildlife reserves, in the hope that they will connect the existing fragmented government-owned reserves. Detractors, though, say privately-managed reserves could begin a shift toward commercial hunting, with licences and animal lives then being sold for profit.

Peter Smetacek, noted lepidopterist and founder of the Bhimtal-based Butterfly Research Centre, also supports the push to relax laws, saying the current WPA makes conflict worse. "The WPA makes people opposed to wildlife at places where there is intensified conflict," he says. "Before the WPA, India had a mosaic of wildlife laws, which is required in a country this large and diverse. A species may be found in abundance in one area but not in another habitat." Pointing out that the current system does not permit this nuance, he adds, "One cannot accurately describe a given species as 'endangered' or 'prolific' across the entire country, which is what the WPA [tries to do]."

Those opposed to hunting include Dr M.K. Ranjitsinh, who, as deputy secretary for wildlife at the then-Union ministry of agriculture, drafted the WPA, 1972. A former member of the national board for wildlife, Dr Ranjitsinh says hunting is anachronistic. "We were a nation of hunters, but the country and the world have moved on. The acceptability of hunting has diminished—there is a massive backlash now even when a man-eating carnivore is killed," he points out. He also highlights the fallibility of blanket laws, saying: "There is also a fundamental question involved in allowing hunting; are we [saying we have a] surplus of certain species? If we are at surplus in one place doesn't mean we are at surplus across the country."

He also addresses another common pro-hunting argument, that the commercial model used by countries in Africa could be applied in India to generate profit. "We cannot apply the African model in India mainly because we aren't a land-excess country," he says. "Also, the practical experience is that you can't have a halfway house in India. If you allow hunting, you risk losing everything [we have gained in terms of conservation], because implementation of most laws is lax in the country. There will be no effective monitoring of what animals are being killed and whether hunters are adhering to norms. And as far as crop protection goes, there is always the option of translocating [animals] rather than culling."

Groups like the True Conservation Alliance (TCA)—founded by legal researcher Meghna Uniyal, agriculturist and photographer-film maker Ryan Lobo and agriculturist Marcus Campos—are looking to reframe the perception of hunting as a crop-protection measure and a tool to generate profit. It is pushing for regulated hunting to be permitted outside protected areas (sanctuaries and national parks), saying this will improve wildlife management. "This will engage the local population to protect wildlife, since that will give them revenue," says Lobo. The TCA has also argued for the WPA to be renamed the Wild Resources Management Act, rather than the Wild Life (Protection) Act, which offers as clear a look at the heart of this debate as one might hope for: whether wild animals are life to be protected or resources to be managed.

The group is also pushing for more community ownership of wildlife to bring investment into the sector. It highlights Namibia's example, saying about half that country uses wildlife as a resource to generate revenue. It adds that many countries allow hunting, and says Pakistan's *markhor* (mountain goat) conservation programme owes its success largely to sport hunting. Under this model, a limited number of hunting permits are issued each year, bringing in around $10,000 (Rs 7.5 lakh) each, with 80 per cent of the revenue earmarked for local communities.

Many farmer associations also support the push to legalise hunting, though for different reasons. "Existing laws do not protect farmers from crop-raiding animals," says Chengal Reddy, head of the Hyderabad-based Consortium of Indian Farmers Associations. "What is worrying is that the problem has increased over the years. We receive regular complaints about monkeys and wild boars in south India and *nilgai* (blue bulls) in north India raiding crops. And there is no scientific method to compensate farmers for their losses. In such a situation, it could be a good idea to allow some culling." Also noting the potential commercial benefit, he adds that hunting could "lead to enhancement of incomes through tourism".

The TCA has also attacked the WPA on other grounds—for example, claiming it infringes on religious traditions that involve hunting and alleging the WPA itself was an attempt by the Indira Gandhi government to supersede the traditional hunting rights of locals and local rulers. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's government did battle with former princes over traditional privileges like the privy purse. However, experts like Dr Ranjitsinh—who is of princely descent himself—says that while Prime Minister Gandhi and the former royals were often at loggerheads, he does not believe there was any intent to attack them through the WPA. "Mrs Gandhi informed me that a group of tribal MPs had opposed the WPA on the grounds that their traditional rights would be curtailed," he recollects. "The ministry of tribal welfare had also opposed the Act in the cabinet. Mrs Gandhi wanted the tribal MPs to be convinced that the Act was for the good of wildlife. [My position was] that there were other communities in the country—such as former royals—who traditionally hunted as well, and that if an exception was made for tribal traditions, it would have to be made for other groups too. I also asked the ministry of tribal welfare if there were any rights like hunting rituals established for tribals in the law. It did not produce any such law," he says.

Though India has broadly banned hunting since 1972, in recent years, some states in India have temporarily declared some species as 'vermin' to permit their culling in cases of extreme conflict. Among others, Bihar has al-

NO SANCTUARY The killing of 'Cecil the lion' by a trophy hunter with a permit just outside a national park in Zimbabwe in July 2015 sparked global outrage

ZIMBABWE NATIONAL PARKS/AFP

REGULATED HUNTING

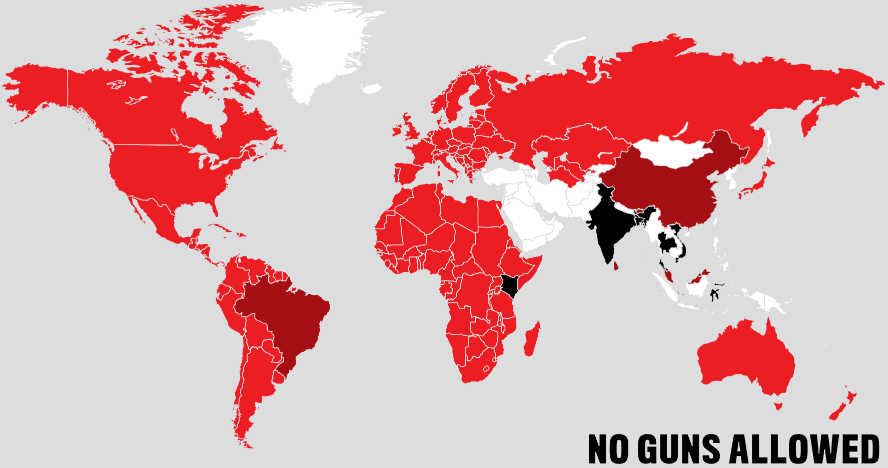
"The IPC allows the use of force against others to prevent bodily harm or loss of property. There is no reason why farmers should not be allowed to similarly protect their crops"

MADHAV GADGIL

Founder, Centre for Ecological Sciences

LICENCE TO KILL

Hunting regulations vary across the globe. In some regions, it is widely permitted; in India, it is entirely banned



HALFWAY HOME

● Hunting allowed with strong restrictions

China, Brazil, Malaysia, Sri Lanka

SHOOTER'S ALLEY

● Countries/ regions with liberal hunting regimes

Europe, North Asia, Africa, Australia and New Zealand

NO GUNS ALLOWED

● Hunting not allowed

India, some countries in Southeast Asia, Kenya

(Note: Regulations vary even among liberal countries; not an exhaustive list)

NO HUNTING

> **"You can't have a halfway house in India. If you permit regulated hunting, you risk losing everything we have gained in terms of conservation because of weak enforcement"**
>
> **DR M.K. RANJITSINH**
>
> *Former member, National Board for Wildlife*

lowed the culling of *nilgai*, Himachal Pradesh of monkeys and Telangana of wild boar. Madhya Pradesh is in the process of drafting a new law to allow the killing of *nilgai* in case of crop damage. Public opinion is divided, with pro-hunting groups saying the process of getting permission is too lengthy and anti-hunting groups calling for even more restrictions.

Some, like ecologist and professor Madhav Gadgil, have called for an overall withdrawal of the WPA. "The WPA is anti-people, anti-science and has been used to harass people," he says. He adds a legal rationale for the right to hunt: "The Indian Penal Code allows for the use of force against human beings in cases of bodily harm or loss of property," he says. "There is no reason why farmers should not be allowed to similarly protect their crops from animals. That the WPA prevents farmers from doing so is unconstitutional." However, he adds that he does not support hunting for sport.

"Hunting, in the commercial sense, doesn't fit into the Indian ethos," says Vivek Menon, executive director and founder of the Wildlife Trust of India. "Culturally, we are different from the countries that allow hunting." He also highlights the point about lax enforcement, saying, "In a vast country like India, regulating commercial hunting could become a monitoring nightmare." However, he also believes that farmers should have the right to protect their crops from wild animals. "The government needs to address this problem," he says.

Environmental lawyer Ritwik Dutta says that culls are not the only solution to such conflicts. "Fencing is a viable option that the state needs to invest in," he says. He argues against any legalisation of hunting, specifically commercial trophy hunting, and says the Indian and African experiences cannot be compared. "African countries have smaller populations, which allows them to reserve large areas for wildlife. In India, only three per cent of the area has been marked off for wildlife." He also opposes the hunting-for-revenue model, saying, "The funds for wildlife need not come through killing."

For now, the proposed amendments are being reviewed by a parliamentary standing committee on science and technology, environment, forests and climate change. Even if passed, they will not overturn the overall ban on hunting in India, but many remain alarmed at the prospect of any weakening of protections. The proposals also include enhanced punishments for wildlife crimes, a rationalisation of the schedules of protected species and provisions relating to international norms on the trade of endangered species. Many describe this latest amendment as being the most sweeping of all the changes the WPA has seen since 1972. Whether it improves or worsens matters for India's wildlife is open to a wild guess. ■

ON THE JOB
Tapesh Mathur with a cow that received a prosthetic, in Rajasthan's Pali district

SHIPRA MATHUR

HAPPINESS MANTRA

> ***"Let animals be safe from man-made road accidents so that they are not disabled. I would love it if no animal required a prosthetic, but if they do, let us take responsibility to help them"***
>
> **— DR TAPESH MATHUR**

Helping animals *find their feet*

A Rajasthan veterinarian makes prosthetics to give disabled animals a second chance

By **ROHIT PARIHAR**

In 2014, Dr Tapesh Mathur was posted at the Hingonia Cow Rehabilitation Shelter in Jaipur following rising cases of animal deaths there. The veterinarian would perform at least one surgery a day to help cows that had consumed plastic. While his efforts helped bring down fatalities, Mathur realised the need for prosthetics for cows that had suffered accidents and lost limbs. "Animals do survive after the amputation of a limb but, in a good number of cases, a prosthetic makes things easier and extends their lifespan," he says.

Mathur soon started making prosthetics for animals, under the brand 'Krishna Limb', named after the first cow that received an artificial limb from him. He has to date provided 160 prosthetics, mostly free of charge, across the country. That has required travelling to 16 states to do the job, beginning with taking measurements for the cast and finally fixing the prosthetic and getting the animal up on its feet. The travel time on each project, he says, itself runs into a week, besides days spent at the prosthetic workshop that he has set up at his modest home in Jaipur. When the pandemic struck and movement was restricted, Mathur took to video calls to get the cast measurements through local veterinarians and guiding owners on handling their animals after the prosthetic had been fixed.

Mathur says that to be able to use a prosthetic, the amputation should leave as long a bone intact as possible. But more than that, the animal owner needs to be patient and sensitive as getting an animal mobile on a prosthetic requires time and training. Besides, the artificial limb needs to be removed after seven to eight hours of use, cleaned and refitted the next day. Mathur says many people approach him thinking that a prosthetic is a permanent solution that will free them from the added responsibility of caring for a disabled animal. The vet takes a written assurance from those ultimately going for it that they will continue to take care of their animal.

Mathur's work has mostly helped cows but he rues that many *gaushalas* lack dedication in caring for the animals. There are positive experiences as well, such as a calf having prosthetics in both front limbs walking well. Then, in Bikaner, Mathur fitted an artificial limb on a cow and persuaded the owner to take her back home from the *gaushala*. In Hyderabad and Jaisalmer, pregnant cows that received artificial limbs delivered healthy calves. He also cites being approached by owners who were otherwise planning to put down their disabled horses or camels.

Mathur says he is these days working on a prosthetic for the rear limb of a camel near Jodhpur. The owner, Ghasi Ram, is being trained to help the camel stand up with the support of ropes. "It's commendable how the owner had all this while been getting the camel to stand on three limbs," says Mathur. Not all efforts pay off, such as the failed attempt to get braces for an injured bird. But Mathur strives on. Inspired, his wife Shipra has left her teaching job and joined him. ■

TAPESH MATHUR, 50

A veterinarian with the Rajasthan government

Jaipur

Happiness Quest: *A joint India Today-RPG Group enterprise that celebrates exemplary initiatives to spread happiness*

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Q&A WITH MALAVIKA SARUKKAI
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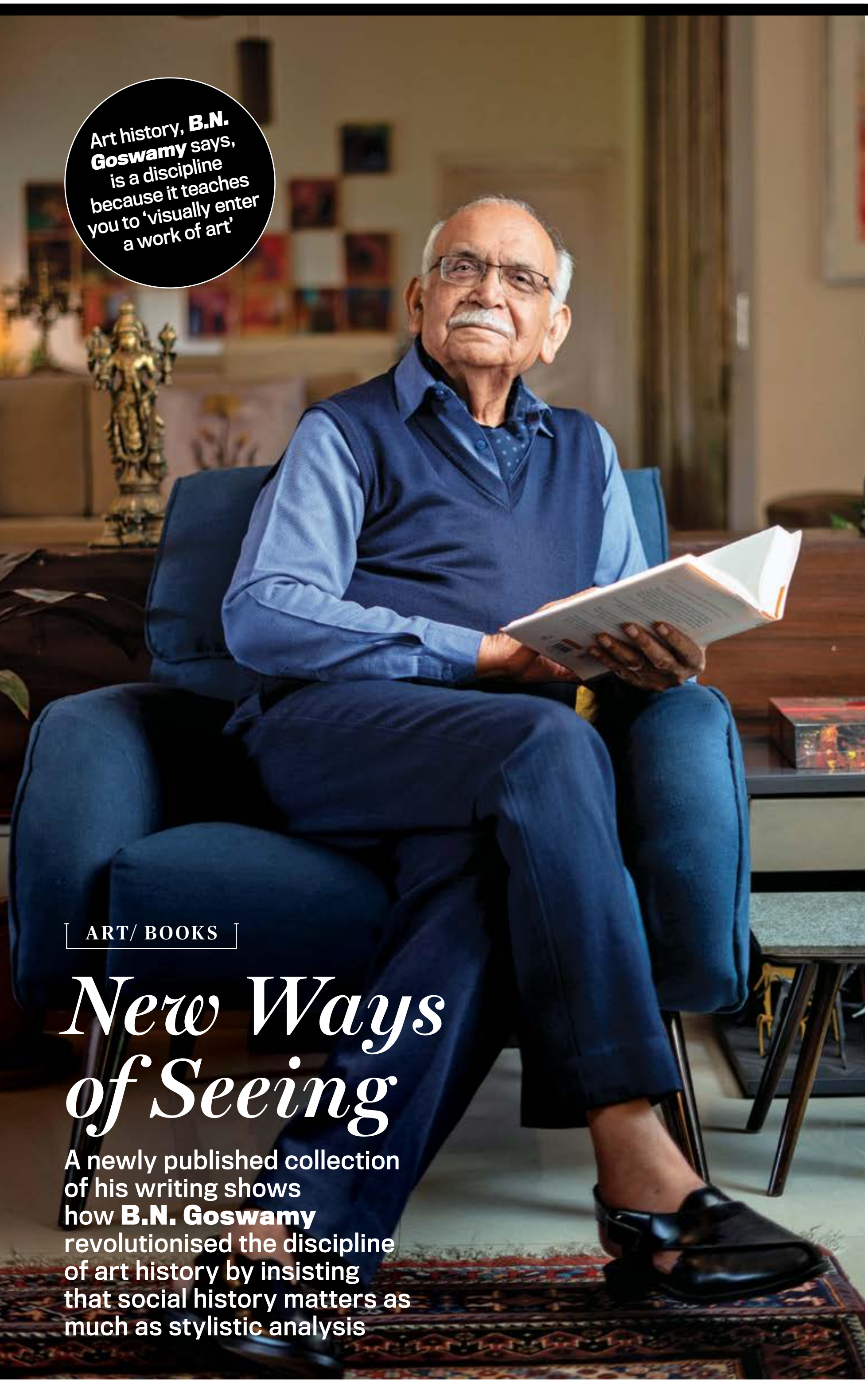


Art history, **B.N. Goswamy** says, is a discipline because it teaches you to 'visually enter a work of art'

ART/ BOOKS

New Ways of Seeing

A newly published collection of his writing shows how **B.N. Goswamy** revolutionised the discipline of art history by insisting that social history matters as much as stylistic analysis

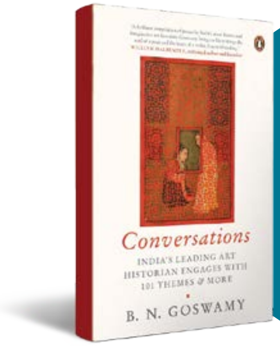
SANDEEP SAHDEV

B.N. GOSWAMY'S REGULAR column in Chandigarh's newspaper *The Tribune* is titled 'Art and Soul'. His selection of 125 short pieces written over 25 years, now published as a book, is titled *Conversations*. "Between whom?" he invites us to ask, before gamely admitting he doesn't know. Well, they read like conversations between him and us, so easy-going is his style, anticipating our questions. They are chats about art, and about old friends.

We will come to the friends presently, but we might first query the publisher's subtitle: 'India's Leading Art Historian Engages with 101 Themes & More'. Sparing his blushes over 'leading', I ask, being named as an art historian, does he consider it to be a genuine discipline? Given that he founded the Department of Art History at Panjab University in 1970, and taught there for three decades, besides writing copiously on art, we cannot be surprised that he insists it is. Not very widely practised in India but a discipline nonetheless.

On the other hand, "I have never been to a single class in art history in my life," he admits. If your response is "So what?"—well, imagine if we were discussing medicine. In addition, all of the previous contenders for the office indicated in the subtitle began as something else. A.K. Coomaraswamy—the subject of a glowing tribute here, tinged with indignation that he is not more widely read—began as a mineralogist. W.G. Archer and M.S. Randhawa—who inspired Goswamy's interest in Pahari painting—were civil servants. Archer served in the ICS in Bihar and Randhawa was a lifelong bureaucrat.

Indeed, Goswamy initially followed suit: he joined the IAS (1956 cadre) and served two years in Gaya before returning to Panjab University. There he studied not art history (not yet available) but history. He had read Randhawa's *Kangra Valley Painting*. But he had also read the English historian G.M. Trevelyan—a gifted story-teller who examined the social life and identity of a nation. Bringing together these two points—hitherto poles apart—Goswamy decided to investigate the social conditions in which Pahari painting emerged. His professors doubted it could be done, so Goswamy challenged them to consult the experts. Write to Archer, he told them; write to A.L. Basham at SOAS, write to Karl Khandalavala. They did, and all three wrote back and said: Good idea, let him have a go.


Conversations
INDIA'S LEADING ART HISTORIAN ENGAGES WITH 101 THEMES & MORE
B. N. GOSWAMY

CONVERSATIONS
India's Leading Art Historian Engages with 101 Themes & More
by B.N. Goswamy
ALLEN LANE
₹999; 556 pages

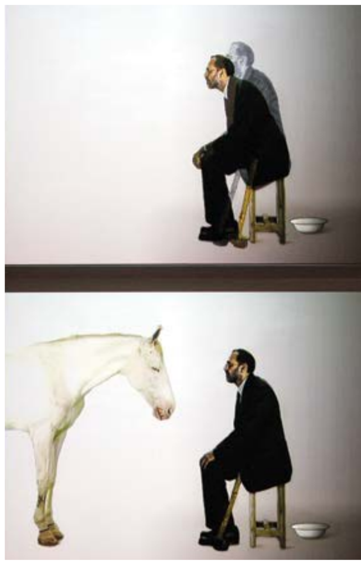
Thus the main course of his research was set from the start, leading to his most distinctive contributions. But it led him into trouble too. His early encounters with Archer were warm and friendly. He first met him in London in 1962, after Archer had examined his thesis. Thereafter he was a regular guest at the Archers' house, and Goswamy helped W.G. to decipher inscriptions in Takri, the script of the hills. Archer still often visited Punjab too, gathering data for his magnum opus, *Indian Paintings from the Punjab Hills* (1973).

Even before that book was published, Goswamy's own first major work, *Family as the Basis of Style* (1968), undermined the elaborate but fragile architecture of Archer's regional definitions. It looked as though the factual minutiae of social history were blasting a hole in the time-honoured practice of stylistic analysis. It is more to Archer's discredit than Goswamy's that this difference in approach led to their falling out. And Randhawa—friend and disciple to Archer—was even less forgiving. Goswamy's note on Archer—written long after the latter's death—fondly recalls their early friendship. He writes less about Randhawa, though he justly credits him with inaugurating a 'museums movement' in Punjab.

Another formative influence was Mulk Raj Anand, for a while Tagore Professor at Panjab University. Goswamy feels Anand's foreign exposure made him a misfit in his own country. But he was fiery, engagingly argumentative, and could make people excited about art. *'Ajeeb aadmi tha woh'*, he says, borrowing a famous line. Sure, but despite all that he wrote about art, Anand was not primarily an art historian. Perhaps you can't pigeonhole a polymath, but he was foremost a novelist.

So between Anand and Trevelyan, we have some likely sources of Goswamy's passion and prose style. But where did the art historical discipline come from, since it wasn't the classroom? Perhaps in part from another encounter: with Karl Khandalavala, that 'thorough gentleman', with whom Goswamy sat on museum acquisitions committees in the 1970s. He observed his unerring eye, and how he allowed art to speak to him. Close scrutiny is the key. Art history is a discipline, according to Goswamy, because it teaches you to 'visually enter a work of art'. ■

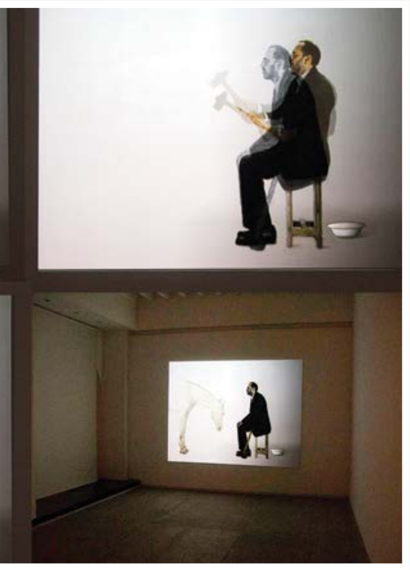
–Giles Tillotson

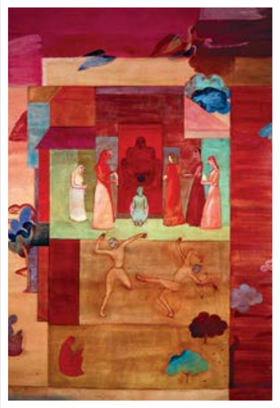


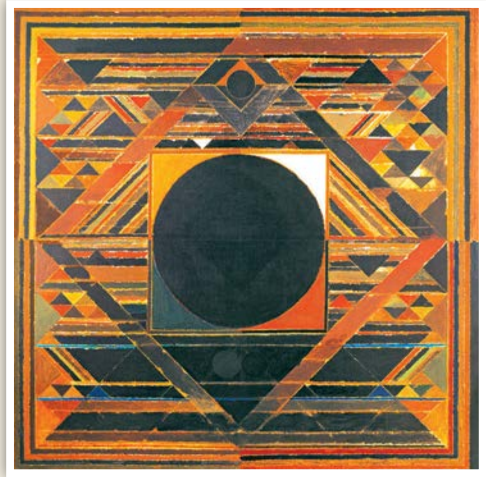
20th *Century Indian Art* is one of those sumptuously produced Thames & Hudson tomes that you immediately want to steal from the bookshop, its size and heft presenting a daunting challenge to any booklifter working alone and without an oversize satchel or backpack.

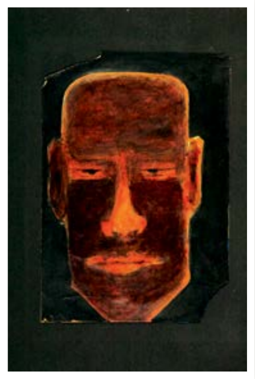
The volume fills a much-needed gap. One may or may not have felt the absence of a comprehensive overview of modern and contemporary Indian art but, now that it is here, you wonder what took so long and how those interested in the subject managed without such a critical compendium. As the introduction tells us, the book 'tells the story of Indian artists' responses to artistic modernity as part of a global phenomenon...', addressing the question: '...what does Indian modernism share with other modernisms, and in what way does it offer a unique vision of modernity?'

While the sharpest focus is on Indian art in the 20th century, the deep depth of field actually catches roughly the last 140 years of visual and plastic art production in the subcontinent, with









TRUE COLOURS **(Clockwise from left)** ***Cul de sac in Takshilla*****, Ranbir Kaleka;** ***Birth 2*****, Nilima Sheikh;** ***Germination*****, S.H. Raza;** ***Face*****, Rabindranath Tagore**

ART/ BOOKS

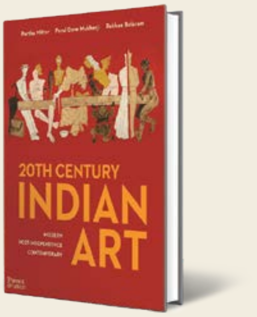
A GOOD BIG ELEPHANT

Modern and contemporary Indian art now has that essential critical compendium it needed

the exception of cinema. The book is divided into four sections that—quite logically—overlap somewhat: the first part brings us from the last couple of decades before the turn of the century till 1947; the second part lays out the period roughly from the 1930s to 1990-91; the third part maps and explores the situation from the rupture of globalisation almost to the current moment; and the fourth part provides a brief but very necessary foray into the histories of modernism in Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Myanmar.

Besides the editors' essays which concisely introduce each section, there is writing from about 40 different critics who have written about the subject. Included also are interviews with artists and critics. Throughout the volume, we find boxes with memoirs and anecdotes such as Gulammohammed Sheikh's moving tribute to his friend Bhupen Khakhar and Jyotindra Jain's hilarious and troubling story about Rauschenberg/ Roshandan's encounter with a traditional block printer in Kutch. These and the short biographical notes provide important narrative release valves from the continual track of the critical essays.

As one would want with a book such as this, you can spend hours moving about within its covers without reading a single word. You can begin a material trek from the oily impastos and chiaroscuros of the late 19th century, move through the lithographs and watercolours of the early 20th, to the cloth and plaster of Dashrath Patel's *Dargah* and the bronze 'dhokra' of Meera Mukherjee's *Ashoka at Kalinga*, or you could do a connecting archaeology of a certain kind of figure, say from Abanindranath's *Bharat Mata* to Amrita Sher-Gil's *Three Girls* to Nilima Sheikh's *When Champa Grew Up* to Nalini Malani's *Old Arguments on Indigenism*. The book, with its 600-odd illustrations, is thus full of possible rewarding games of visual snakes and ladders.



20TH CENTURY INDIAN ART: Modern, Post-Independence, Contemporary
by Partha Mitter, Parul Dave Mukherji, Rakhee Balaram (Editors)
THAMES & HUDSON
(IN ASSOCIATION WITH ART ALIVE)
₹8,995; 774 pages

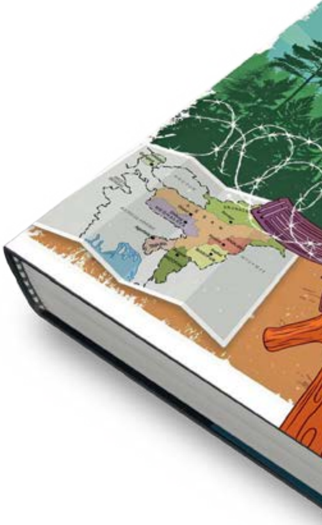
A huge project such as this is bound to contain some errors and professional boo-boo spotters will also likely have a good time combing through its pages. Regrettably, one blooper is to be found in the very first paragraph of the Introduction: 'Geopolitics intervened in the middle of the century, bifurcating the old subcontinent into two new states in 1947: the new Indian Republic and the Islamic Republic of West and East Pakistan (later to be *renamed* Bangladesh)' (italics mine). Sensitive Bangladeshis may take umbrage, but eventually one suspects they might forgive the editors. All in all, even if you want to argue with different corners of it, this is a good big elephant of a book to have in the room. ■

–Ruchir Joshi

BOOKS

THE LONGEST WAR

Sudeep Chakravarti has written an accessible account of the fraught efforts to end the Naga insurgency



SUDEEP CHAKRAVARTI'S book is part-journalism, part-history, with a focus on Nagaland and Manipur, the two states central to the Naga issue

Early on in *The Eastern Gate*, author Sudeep Chakravarti visits a heroin hutch in Moreh on Manipur's border with Myanmar. Here, a "portly, jolly matron" measures out the drug from a hollowed-out bamboo bowl into a tiny metal container called *kokta*, usually used for tobacco or ground spices. Just months before his visit to this place, in February 2014, a colonel of the Indian Army and five others had been arrested on charges of ferrying pseudoephedrine tablets from Imphal to Moreh, valued at Rs 15-20 crore. The colonel's car sported defence ministry plates and a beacon. "You have heard about the arrest of a colonel," an official with a central intelligence agency later told Chakravarti in Imphal. "If he can do it at his level, then what about brigadiers, senior officers, ministers of Manipur?"

In the next chapter, we find him meeting a senior militant leader of the National Socialist Council of Nagalim's Isak-Muivah or the NSCN(I-M) faction. The former deputy chief of the NSCN(I-M) army, Ramkathing Varah, is sitting with a Walther PPK in his hands, as they have tea in the house of a mutual acquaintance who had received the handgun as a wedding gift from the group's military chief. The subject of their intense conversation is the highly contentious one of administrative autonomy for the Naga-majority hill areas of Manipur. It is this issue that has proved a major complicating factor

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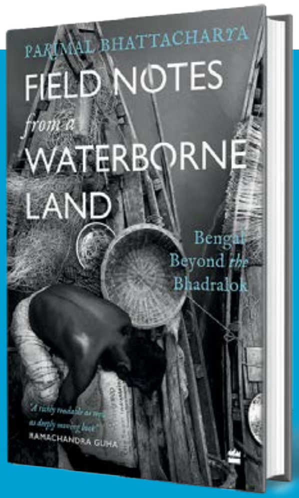
BOOKS

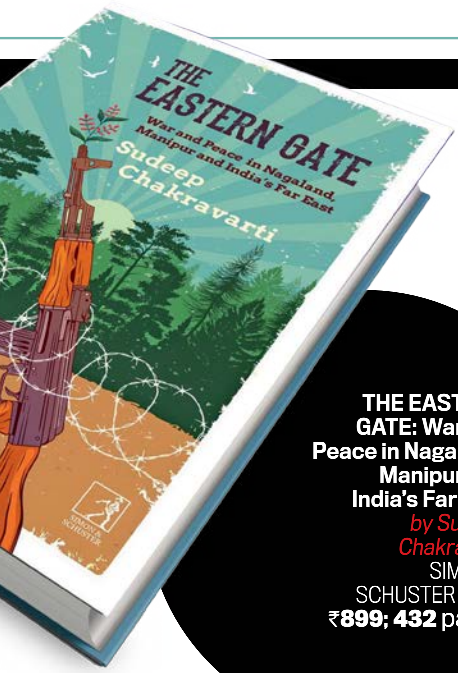
Outside City Limits

A Kolkata teacher discovers in Bengal's villages a world the *bhadralok* barely see or understand

In 2006, the Kolkata author, a college teacher, set himself a modest project of investigating the puzzle of primary school dropouts in rural West Bengal. As he explains in his preface, the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan had caught on; there seemed a change in the air. A few years later, the churning that swept out the well-entrenched Left Front also happened. He began tentatively, asking around, getting in touch with friends who travelled to the countryside—an intrepid photographer, a classmate who had given up a corporate job to run a school in a remote area, a taciturn colleague who disappeared every weekend to his village in the Sunderbans. As he travelled, Kolkata became remote. Middle-class life seemed like an apparition. The disconnect between the rural poor and the educated urbanised seemed complete.


PARIMAL BHATTACHARYA
FIELD NOTES from a WATERBORNE LAND
Bengal Beyond the Bhadralok
RAMACHANDRA GUHA

FIELD NOTES FROM A WATERBORNE LAND: Bengal Beyond the Bhadralok
by Parimal Bhattacharya
HARPERCOLLINS
₹499; **312** pages



THE EASTERN GATE: War and Peace in Nagaland, Manipur and India's Far East
by Sudeep Chakravarti
SIMON & SCHUSTER INDIA
₹899; 432 pages

in concluding the peace talks with the group, which started in 1997. After almost 25 years of talks, there's still no solution in sight that is acceptable to all.

This book is primarily a detailed study of the long-running peace process that has tried to bring closure to the conflict in Nagaland, India's longest-running insurgency. It is part-journalism, part-history, with its focus—as the book's subtitle, 'War and Peace in Nagaland, Manipur and India's Far East', suggests—on the two states that are at the centre of the Naga issue. Chakravarti has been to most key places and met many of the top people involved with this issue. This includes the cast of characters usual in such places and matters—militants, spies, police and army officers, top bureaucrats, representatives of powerful civil society organisations and student bodies—and the person, who in many ways, is at the centre of it all, NSCN(I-M) chief Thuingaleng Muivah.

While there are several books on the Naga insurgency, they mainly fall into three categories: academic works, fiction and autobiography. None of them, to my knowledge, is a popular history on the details of the currently ongoing Naga peace process. Chakravarti's work plugs that gap. The passing engagement with other areas, such as Meghalaya, is largely extraneous to the main narrative and could probably have been left out without loss. That apart, *The Eastern Gate* is an excellent read, and a very useful one for people interested in the inner workings of the individuals, organisations and factors—including widespread corruption and the lucrative drug trade—that determine the fortunes of internal war and peace in Nagaland, Manipur and India's far east. ■

–Samrat Choudhury

The ex-deputy chief of the NSCN(I-M) army, Ramkathing Varah, is sitting with a Walther PPK in his hands...

The first person he interviewed was a cheerful caregiver who had nursed his terminally ill mother. She was Matua, a sect among the Namasudra community that had crossed the border from Bangladesh. The account of her struggle, told with candour and without bitterness, hinted at larger undercurrents—the long history of Partition, violence, migration, dispossession.

Unmaking communities in deltaic Bengal was also climate change, with the shifting terrain starting to play spoilsport. Poor peasants were set adrift by the periodic cyclones, floods and homes going underwater; they clung to *chars*, relocated to uninhabited land, made peace with the mangroves. New stories about the locality presented themselves to the author whenever he travelled to a remote school. Sometimes it was corporate greed, at other times, of the instrumentalities of state policy. One small campus was forced shut for ideological reasons—Maoists were against donations from foreign sources. The struggle was overwhelming.

The foul-mouthed boatman Nakul Sardar with deep knowledge of river systems; Savitri Munda, who had fallen foul of her village and escaped punishment as a witch; Sabram Banara, who told the author matter-of-factly that the Kolhos had roots in Harappa, are some of the heart-wrenching and moving portraits in this book. But there are poignant stories about teachers on the ground—Kanaicharan who had the tough job of allaying students' disappointment on days eggs ran short in the state-sponsored midday meal; Ananda, who had made it his habit to look out for children who came to school without breakfast.

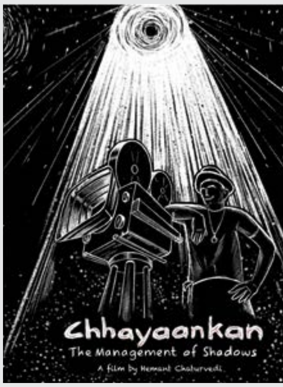
This book is more than a hard-hitting report on how the marginalised live in places where the *bhadralok* fear to tread. The author's deep empathy is leavened with a luminous sensibility drawn from literary fiction, reminiscent of the concerned and investigative travel writing by past masters in Bengali and English—Abdul Jabbar, Subhash Mukhopadhyay, V.S. Naipaul and Bruce Chatwin. ■

–Partho Datta

PARIMAL BHATTACHARYA'S deep empathy is leavened with a luminous sensibility drawn from literary fiction

DOCUMENTARY

THE BEST SHOT



Cinematographers have for long been the unsung heroes of Hindi films. **Hemant Chaturvedi's** new documentary finally brings his fellow lensmen into the spotlight

A

After more than a few unsavoury experiences on set, Hemant Chaturvedi quit his job as a cinematographer in 2015. "I was under a lot of pressure, and I'd been feeling disenchanted for a long time by then. The politics, the dishonesty and the quantum of nonsense just became too much," says Chaturvedi over the phone. After sharing an emotional Facebook post, Chaturvedi drove off to Lonar lake. Sitting by its edge for about 10 days, he contemplated his future. Since he still had a lot of questions about cinematography, Chaturvedi rang up a few veterans and requested some FaceTime with them. Fortunately for him (and us), most of them readily agreed.

Ranging from Peter Pereira (*Coolie, Shahenshah*), Jehangir Chaudhry (*Holi, Being Cyrus*) and Govind Nihalani (*Aakrosh, Ardh Satya*) to Baba Azmi (*Arjun, Mr India*) and Nadeem Khan (*Gaman, Disco Dancer*), Chaturvedi recorded conversations with 14 of the 17 veteran cinematographers he had intended to work with in 1990-91. "Everyone spoke for two hours each and we got almost 40 hours of footage," Chaturvedi says. These interviews culminated in *Chhayaankan: The Management of Shadows*—a 138-minute masterclass on the ins and outs of cinematography in Indian films.

CHHAYAANKAN is a 138-minute masterclass on the ins and outs of cinematography in Indian films

The film is a delightful love letter to a bygone era, but also a chilling documentation of disillusionment with an industry where even the most gifted technicians get little appreciation. "The day I finished the interviews, I realised my decision to move on was probably the best one I'd taken in my life. Twenty years on, I didn't want to be that person who is still hoping to find glory one last time. *Kuchh nahin hone wala*, boss!" says Chaturvedi.

By his own admission, Chaturvedi took longer to edit the film than he would have liked. Reading the news about Ishwar Bidri's (*Damini, Border*) passing and Nadeem Khan being in a coma for nearly two years, he suddenly realised most of his interviewees were 80-plus. "I went into panic and realised that if my own 'characters' don't see the film, then it would be sinful," says Chaturvedi. He dug through the footage to come up with 24 timelines for the questions he had asked. After that, Chatur-

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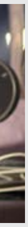
DIGITAL ARCHIVE

FROM THE OUTSIDE IN

An archive of Indo-German journalist Navina Sundaram's work promotes a new internationalism

Documentary filmmaker, editor, and Indo-German journalist Navina Sundaram comes from a family of artists who have shaped the landscape of art and culture in India. Her grandfather, Umrao Singh Sher-Gil, the eldest son of Raja Surat Singh of Majithia, was born into the Punjab aristocracy. He was also a scholar of Sanskrit and Persian and was considered to be one of the pioneers of photography in India. Amrita Sher-Gil, a pioneer of modern Indian art, is Sundaram's aunt. And her brother, Vivan Sundaram, is one of India's foremost visual artists.

The Fifth Wall, a digital archive of Sundaram's body of work culls over 40 years of her work in public television. Created by Berlin-based novelist, screenwriter and film producer Merle Kröger and multimedia artist Mareike Bernien, it features films, reports, texts, letters, photographs and annotations. The archive, largely in German and available to browse online (die-fuenfte-wand.de), serves both



BEHIND THE LENS (From left clockwise) Peter Pereira, Govind Nihalani, a poster for *Chhayaankan*, Baba Azmi and Nadeem Khan

vedi and editor Suchitra Sathe worked on it for over 11 weeks in Pune.

Chaturvedi mentions how he intends to release the interviews as a series of YouTube episodes. "I left out all technical aspects for those not familiar with filmmaking. Instead, we focused on humaneness, dignity, commitment, passion and hard work," he says. About plans to release the film for a wider audience, Chaturvedi recounts a line Naseeruddin Shah once said to him: "*Picture nahin chalti hai, bhidu! Sirf kismet chalti hai.*" ■

–Tatsam Mukherjee

RADIO

Right Frequencies

Several projects are now exploring how the radio made the world a smaller, better place

When radio became popular around the world in the late 1920s, one of its chief uses was to disseminate state propaganda. No one could have imagined that this very tool would become an accessory in thawing cultural differences, and lead to interesting exchanges of perspective. At the peak of the Cold War, for instance, a generation growing up in Madhepura (Bihar) was glued to the transistor. Radio Berlin International (RBI)—the foreign broadcasting station of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) or East Germany—was the source of news for many listeners' clubs in Bihar, including the Lenin Club in Madhepura chaired by Arvind Srivastava. In 1990, after the reunification of Germany, the club and RBI both, sadly, withered away.

Going through RBI's archives, Berlin-based academic Anandita Bajpai discovered the correspondence between the radio station and the listeners' clubs. She was struck by its intimacy, the unlikely friendship. Eventually, Bajpai managed to locate Srivastava. "I googled him, knowing that he was a poet and a part of the Bihar Progressive Writers' Association," Bajpai recounts during a video chat. In Madhepura, Bajpai discovered in the attic of the Lenin Club, RBI paraphernalia and, with it, a forgotten exchange between two radically different cultures. This became one of the core chaptrers in her recent book, *Cordial Cold War*, and a documentary, *The Sound of Friendship: Warm Wavelengths in a Cold, Cold War.*

BAJPAI WAS STRUCK BY THE INTIMACY IN THE CORRESPONDENCE BETWEEN THE EAST BERLIN RADIO STATION AND THE LISTENERS' CLUBS

There are today more projects like Bajpai's that are all trying to examine how sound has played an essential role in building intimacy between cultures. Historian Isabel Huacuja Alonso is working on a book called *Radio for the Millions* that looks at radio broadcasting in Hindi and Urdu between the years 1920 and 1980. Former radio journalist Syma Tariq, who is currently pursuing her PhD at CRiSAP (University of Arts, London), has also collaborated with Colomboscope (colomboscope.lk) on a six-part radio series, *A Thousand Channels*. This features talks, music, poetry from places such as Assam and Bangladesh, and even Australia. ■

–Tatsam Mukherjee

FRANZISKA KRUG/GETTY IMAGES

autobiographical purposes and evidence of post-colonial legacies. Filmmaker and curator Madhushree Dutta termed the archive "an assertion of reversed lens–a sharp opposite of colonial anthropology".

Born in 1945, Sundaram grew up in New Delhi. In 1963, when she began moderating the 'Asian Miniature series' for ARD television, she didn't speak a word of German. She weaponised her unfamiliarity with the language by memorising the script in front of her without really knowing what the words meant. It started off a remarkable career in German public television which lasted until 2004. In the course of her career, Sundaram has emerged as a distinct post-colonial voice from the global South.

Structured to resemble a media library, *The Fifth Wall* is curated from Sundaram's personal archive and that of German public broadcaster ARD. Centring Sundaram, the archive is an exhaustive record of the personal and political: a considered reflection on the various ways issues of internationalism, class, racism, alienation, migration and decolonisation can seep into the history of media. In her encapsulation of German history, Sundaram assumes the journalistic position of offering what she describes as "inside views of an outsider or outside views of an insider", depending on how one views it. ■

–Poulomi Das

IN STEP WITH THE WORLD

For 50 years, Bharatanatyam exponent **Malavika Sarukkai** has been forging a relationship with the world through dance. Her new show, *Anubandh*, now responds to the pandemic

Q+A

Q. The pandemic hit the performing arts hard. How challenging was it for you?
For the first few weeks, I withdrew. After that, I felt I had to fill myself with positive energy. The only thing I have been able do in the past two years is dance. I have never taken a two-year gap in my life. Left to myself, I became a student of dance once more.

Q. Many took to doing online shows. Did you do any?
I didn't feel the need to. If I was on social media, I might have generated some work, but I am not on any platform. I liked being away—the most conversations I had in the past two years were with dance, and hopefully dance spoke back. Now I am very much looking forward to meeting my audience.

Q. Tell us more about your new performance?
This virus eliminated all geographic boundaries. We all felt the same emotions of despair and anxiety. After the isolation, I felt the need to connect to nature and people. *Anubandh* is a response to the pandemic and asks: Are we living in worlds that are isolating? Should we not be more inclusive?

Q. On March 6, it will be 50 years since your *arangetram* [stage debut]. As an artist, are you content with the journey?
There's a sense of fulfilment but also gratitude that I have been able to dance and create. I am grateful to my mother, Saroja Kamakshi, who provided me the environment and the stimulus, and my gurus—Kalyanasundaram Pillai, Kalanidhi Narayanan and Rajaratnam Pillai—who gave me a firm foundation.

—with Suhani Singh

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